

The Voices of Parents in the Classroom: A Qualitative Inquiry

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THE VOICES OF PARENTS IN THE CLASSROOM: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

A Thesis

by

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Abstract

The Voices of Parents in the Classroom: A Qualitative Inquiry

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This paper explores the ways in which nine parents experience their children's high school. Although the high school is in the inner city of Boston and serves mostly children of color from working-class and poor families, the parents hold themselves to expectations based on middle-class and dominant societal norms. They experience the school as an institution that often does not live up to its responsibilities to educate and protect their children. The parents then place most of these responsibilities for their children's educations on themselves, both to ensure their children's futures and to prevent any negative judgments from being made about their parenting.

This paper attempts to allow parents to tell the story of their children's school in their own voices and to begin to resist the ways that inner-city parents have been constructed in the literature in the past. In order for urban education to truly change, the voices of parents must be allowed into the conversation and this paper attempts to begin the recognition of those voices.

Introduction and Significance

Urban schools in the United States face many obstacles in their quest to educate millions of children. The communities that house these schools also face many problems related to resources and safety and the parents of students must fight daily battles to protect their children and to help them thrive, personally and academically. Many obstacles make such work very difficult for these parents; those obstacles often arise in the relationships between parents and schools.

There is a “disconnect” between school administrations and parents. By disconnect, I mean a lack of avenues of communication between schools and the parents of children who attend those schools. And with this disconnect comes a possibility for a lack of mutual understanding. Parents can become valuable agents for change within their children’s schools and many already are. However, many schools do not do enough to recognize the agency of parents and to encourage them to be involved in their children’s schools. In fact, many schools actively discourage the agency of parents through formal and informal practices and procedures. This disconnect that arises, then, can be both intentional and structural. The structures of many schools are such that parents are not encouraged to become involved and in some ways, the structures of schools actively prevent or discourage parental involvement; some schools schedule parent-teacher meetings at times when most parents must be at work, for one example. For another example, parents are rarely, if ever, asked for their opinions and suggestions regarding the curriculum that their children study. And yet, school officials often critique parents for not offering more homework assistance to their children. In these ways, then,

the structure of schools is such that it is biased against parental involvement. But because parents usually do not have power in urban communities, when they speak out against such policies that create this disconnect, their voices are disregarded or simply not heard. This paper will provide examples of ways in which this disconnect arises and is maintained in urban schools to the detriment of parents and their children.

In this study, I plan to look at this disconnect and how a group of parents experiences its often inadequate connections with a particular urban school. In part, I will draw on theories about the “cultural disconnect” in schools, or the way that schools base expectations for parent communication and “performance” on a middle-class model of proper “parenting for schooling” (Lareau 2003; Griffith and Smith 2005; Weis 2008). I will examine the issue of responsibility and how parents understand their own responsibilities to the high school. I will examine the issue of communication and how parents are affected by a lack of effort on the part of teachers and school officials to communicate with them. I will examine the way that parents understand the state tests and how they see them as literal threats to their children. Finally, I will examine how parents feel about the curriculum that is taught to their children in this school.

Parents whose children attend “under-performing” schools – schools that are not meeting state and federal requirements with their test scores – do not have enough of a voice in the national debate on education. This debate is especially vital to these parents and their children because their schools largely are not preparing them for a successful future. Inner-city education and the deterioration of schools within inner cities are crucially important issues. In Boston alone, according to district materials, 57,900

children attend city schools on a daily basis. It is a well-known fact that they are not receiving the same education as their peers just miles away in the suburbs. Certain children, mostly “non-white” and low-income children, attend under-resourced, understaffed, oftentimes violent schools in Boston and in many other American cities. Yet national and district officials tend to blame individuals for the problems in urban schools – individual children and individual parents. Furthermore, with the current federal mandate, officials focus on students’ test scores over everything else, including the mental well-being of children, as the parents that I interviewed discussed with justified anger. Structural change is fundamentally necessary. And the inclusion of parent and student voices - with cultural understanding and an appreciation of their insights and strengths - is critical to any real transformation. This paper will argue for hearing and heeding such voices in order to bring about structural change in the education system.

I was a Spanish teacher at Roosevelt High School in St. Louis, Missouri for two years. St. Louis Public Schools is a troubled urban district. While I was a teacher there, when I would make phone calls to parents about their children’s progress or behavior, the parents often would tell me that I was the only teacher from Roosevelt who had called them. Most parents were happy to talk to me and were willing to help. At the same time, I often heard administrators and teachers at the school insulting and dismissing the parents. Often relying on stereotypes of the population that attended our school, these school authorities would group all parents into one category and then dismiss them as being incapable of working with and for their children. I have seen, in the schools in both Boston and St. Louis, that a dangerous disconnect exists between inner-city schools

and parents. The school authorities assume that parents will not want to help and the parents sense this lack of respect and, in turn, they sometimes do not offer help to those who do not respect them or their children. We must remedy this disconnect in order for true, liberatory change to occur in American education.

Much cultural bias lies behind the fact that the institution of urban education often forces parents to be voiceless. Teachers and administrators, if they do interact with parents, often do so based on middle-class expectations and middle-class ideals about how children should be raised (Lareau 2003; Griffith and Smith 2005). So low-income, non-white, and single parents face oppressive and discriminatory expectations when it comes to how they raise their children. When parents do not live up to middle-class, dominant expectations, the powerful agents within the school often deem these parents to be incapable of rearing their children properly. And when a teacher or a principal disrespects a parent in this way, the child can sense that and that child often will stop responding to these authority figures. A cycle of poor student performance and parental blame emerges.

In order to stop this destructive cycle, the strong voices of the parents in these disenfranchised communities must become prominent in school and public discourse. In my research, the parents from one urban high school do not construct themselves as victims but as their children's advocates. And if this advocacy is allowed to take root within the schools, the lives of millions of children will improve in small ways and in systemic ways. Also, once that advocacy takes root, authorities will be forced to stop blaming schools' problems on parents' individual deficits.

Parents' voices are critical. The problems of urban schools have huge costs for students and their families. Students often do not graduate from these disorganized, ineffective schools. If they do graduate, they are not prepared for life after high school. They struggle to catch up in college settings or to hold onto jobs. Authorities set up certain populations to fail and then place all the blame for these failures on individuals, thus undermining families. The voices of students and parents must be heard. We need ideas for drastic change in urban education and parents of students must provide those ideas – they have the greatest stake in the current situation and its amelioration.

I do recognize the tension between my argument for *structural* change and my argument that we must listen to the voices of *individuals* in order to bring about that change. But I feel that parents are powerful enough as agents to demand such *systemic* change – and we need to listen to them.

Research Question(s)

As a result of these beliefs that arose out of my experience as a teacher in a failing inner-city high school, I chose to study the lived experiences of parents with children in an urban public high school in Boston. I will address later how I gained access to this school.

I sought to understand the following questions:

- *Overarching Question:* What has been the lived experience of parents whose children attend a predominantly African-American, inner-city high school in Boston?
- How do parents perceive their relationship with their children's school and the authorities of the school?
- *Sub-Questions:* While generally seen in a deficit way, what strengths and knowledge do working-class/lower-income parents bring to schools that could enrich them?

- How do parents experience interactions with teachers and school administrators?
- Are there differences in experience across the high-school years and if so, what are they?
- How do parents view the increased emphasis on testing and tracking that has occurred since the passage of No Child Left Behind?
- What changes would parents advocate for within their children's schools?
- What aspects of urban education have impacted their children positively and negatively?

Some of these questions became less important over the course of the research project – I was not, for example, able to generalize about differences across grades due to my small sample. Some of the sub-questions were addressed more than others, as the reader shall see in the data and discussion sections that follow. I tried to stay true to what the parents chose to emphasize in their discussions with me, and that is what affected my choices for what to include in this paper.

Methods

I conducted this research in an urban, inner-city high school with a predominantly African-American population in Boston. I volunteered and worked at the school for almost a year before I approached administrators with the idea of conducting this research. I began as a volunteer in January 2007 – I went to the school two to three times a week to help a special education teacher with her study halls and to tutor students who needed extra help. I also put together information on job options for graduating students. In May of that year, an administrator whom I had become acquainted with asked me to help her with the design and coordination of a grant. I worked on that grant for my second year at the school. My third year at the school consisted of continued work on that grant, along with work on a new grant and some duties in ninth-grade classrooms.

When I approached administrators about my research proposal at the end of 2007, I was a normal presence at the school. The teachers, administrators, and students knew me and I had important background knowledge about the school as a result of working there for almost a year. My volunteer work and employment at the school granted me legitimacy and trust amongst the school officials and other community members; in November 2007, I felt that I had accomplished enough for others to trust my intentions and personal ethics, and that is when I approached the school authorities about my research project. I gained immediate approval from them.

But this dual position as both an employee of the school and an “outside” researcher has raised some ethical concerns and quandaries. To give a brief example, some teachers that I work with have shown no reluctance about speaking negatively about parents in front of me because they have forgotten and/or do not care about my research work. I have reflected on this issue and concluded that my dual roles at the school are justified – my employment has allowed me to help improve the education of some children, including some of the children of the parents that I interviewed, and I always try to be open about which of my roles I am fulfilling when I perform different tasks at the school. I choose to follow Vargas’ idea of observant participation – I am actively participating in the organization of the school, and observation for my research is therefore secondary (Hale 2008: 175). The work that I can do to help the students and the school is crucially important to me, so it is acceptable that my role as a researcher is sometimes forgotten by others at the school.

After gaining approval from the administration of the school to conduct my research, and telling the teachers with whom I worked that I would be doing this project, I conducted in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with nine parents whose children attend the school. The interviews took place from February until May of 2008. The process of recruitment began in November of 2007. I first spoke to the Family Outreach Coordinator about my idea for this research and she expressed interest and a willingness to help. She invited me to Family Council meetings. At first, I was an observer, and then I presented my project to the council members and requested volunteers to participate. I originally intended to interview only mothers. After I began to recruit parents, however, I saw that I needed to include all parents who were interested; I realized that if I wanted to retain my legitimacy in the school, I could not exclude any parents from my study, including fathers. Many of the parents at the meetings expressed interest in the project and fathers were among those who volunteered to participate. This research aims to look at the experiences of people who are caretakers of children – the people who are invested in the way the school educates, or fails to educate, their children. So I decided to include all types of parents – mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and fathers. (Because I only interviewed two fathers, in order to maintain their confidentiality, along with the confidentiality of all interview participants, I will refer to everyone as “she” in the data and discussion sections that follow). In order to respect the time and financial constraints of the parents, I provided \$25 in compensation to each interview participant but I was not able to provide compensation for the focus group.

I was raised by a single mother and I have always been aware of the (at times disrespectful) treatment of mothers (and other guardians) within the school system. I explained this to parents at the beginning of the interviews. I also told them that I was a high school teacher for two years to further explain why I am interested in the interactions of schools with parents. Also, at the Family Council meetings when I presented my idea for research, I told the parents that I was a graduate student at Boston College; the parents also knew that I was working on a grant with the senior students and teachers. (This year, my role at the school has grown and I have told the Family Council about these changes).

My position in the school is something that I have been reflexive about throughout the research process. While I initially volunteered in the school, and therefore had no “power,” I was a paid employee of the school by the time my research began. While the job gave me some legitimacy, it also had the potential to lead some parents to distrust me if they saw me as an authority figure. I was successful at establishing rapport with most parents, but the issue of my “authority” is something that I have needed to deal with throughout the process of data collection and analysis. I cannot erase the effects of my employed position on my interviews with parents, nor can I know what all those effects have been, but I have tried to be aware of them throughout this process.

Additionally, my race played (and continues to play) a role in my status at the school and my status with parents. My comments here only touch the surface of this issue. I must acknowledge the role of white privilege in my research – I was able to come into the school, secure employment, and gain permission to conduct research in the

school; but at the end of each day, I also am able to leave the school and the impoverished community in which it is located. I also have tried to be reflexive about how race affected what parents were willing to tell me and what they chose not to tell me. The nine parents, all of whom were people of color, chose to open up to me to different extents and I must continue to be reflexive about how race played a role in our conversations.

After the nine interviews, I conducted an interpretive focus group to share my findings with parents and to determine whether or not they agreed with those findings; I integrated their feedback and their conversation into the analysis in this paper. I first attempted to hold this focus group in the summer of 2008. I invited all of the participants and I advised them to feel free to invite other parents whose children attend the school. The focus group was not completely successful – only one parent was able to attend. While I did have an enlightening conversation with her at that time, I decided to try again. I began attending Family Council meetings again in September of 2008; I told the old and new members of the council about my research and then scheduled another focus group for October of 2008. Three parents were able to attend – two of whom I had not interviewed and one of whom I had interviewed. An interpretive focus group with people who were not interviewed previously as a part of the research project can be beneficial to the analysis (Dodson and Schmalzbauer 2005: 954). The focus group consisted of five questions, or points of conversation – these points were items that I felt I needed to know more about or to clarify with parents. The questions were:

- Do you feel parents ever have to defend the way they parent? Do you feel parents are judged for how they parent?

- What are things that parents can do to support their children's studying and education, besides helping with math homework, for example?
- What do you think parents may have been hesitant to talk about, in terms of the way the school communicates with parents? Why?
- Some parents spoke about having problems with communicating with teachers; some of these parents and others have also said that teachers don't seem to have enough time. Do you think teachers give enough time to parents? Many parents I have met have said that they believe if they do not speak up for their child, the teacher won't do enough for that child. Yet, not all parents have the time to advocate for their child in this way. Do you agree that parents need to speak up for their children, and is that the way it should be?
- How do you talk to your children about the MCAS? How can you help your children "push back" against the test and the judgments that it makes? What do you think the MCAS is really about?

To begin the group conversation, I wrote these questions on five separate pieces of chart paper. After giving a brief introduction at the beginning of the meeting, to make sure that all the parents in attendance knew what the project was about, I asked them to go around to the five pieces of paper and write any initial reactions or thoughts about the questions on the papers. I then asked them which question they wanted to talk about first and we went from there; as a group, we were able to talk about almost all of the questions. I chose to bring food to the focus group in order to honor their time and give something back to them. I am confident that my focus group provided clarification on the points about which I was uncertain and I have integrated some data from that group into the data and discussion sections that follow.

I attended Family Council meetings until January of 2009. I wanted to continue my relationships with the parents and I also enjoyed attending the meetings because of the relationship that I developed with the school's Family Outreach Coordinator; she told me that she appreciated my presence at the meetings and the help that I was able to

provide. I only stopped attending the meetings when my schedule no longer permitted my attendance.

This study followed an iterative path in which the research process was interwoven with analysis through reflexive memoing and other reflexive work. I also wrote field notes at different points during my research, but these notes often were not adequate – I usually felt uncomfortable writing field notes during the Family Council meetings because I did not want to seem to be an intrusive observer. And as my role expanded at the school, I simply did not have time to write notes while I was fulfilling my other duties. Again, I have found that Vargas’ notion of observant participation best explains how my role evolved at the school – “observation became an appendage of the main activity” and I simply did not have the time to write extensive field notes on most days (Hale 2008: 175). But this lack of adequate field notes is a weakness of my study.

Due to the reflexive nature of my study, I created new interview questions after I completed interviews and I often asked new questions in the midst of interviews. The progress of the interview, therefore, was different for most participants, based on where they led the conversation. Numerous theorists, including Riessman, argue that we must allow the participant to guide the path of the interview and to determine the topics about which we speak (Riessman 2008: 33). I used a digital voice recorder in all of the interviews. After completing the transcription process, I conducted a line-by-line coding of the interviews. Then, I moved into focused coding and I developed analytical categories to apply to my data (Charmaz 2004: 509). The analytical categories that emerged in this stage of coding largely determined the topics that I chose to focus on in

the data and discussion sections in this paper. I tried to rely on the grounded theory perspective – I stayed close to the data, testing out ideas and generating theories from the data (Hesse-Biber 2006: 75). Charmaz argues that the analytic codes that a grounded theorist develops should come from the data – the codes emerge from the words of the participants, not from any hypotheses brought in by the researcher (2004: 501). I tried to ensure that my analysis maintained respect for the words and theories of the participants in this way.

While I was conducting the interviews with the nine parents, I was simultaneously involved in analysis. In the midst of conducting the research, I was cycling back through my completed interviews, thinking about which questions went well and which did not, writing notes and reflexive memos about what ideas were emerging and what was fading into the background, and considering how to conduct future interviews in order to address emerging themes. This iterative process is crucial to grounded theory; it also determined how I conducted my interpretive focus group because I used that group conversation to address emerging themes and patterns that I was not sure how to address on my own. By staying close to the data, I hoped to ensure that the parents were the main creators of the theories in this paper.

I sometimes shared my own views with the parents and at the beginning of each interview I explained both my personal and professional reasons for wanting to do this work, as I addressed previously. Luttrell validates the need for “mutual engagement and exchange:” “By listening to and exchanging stories with the women, I developed a clearer picture of what it means to define one’s womanhood against controlling gender-,

race-, and class-based images, including images that I projected onto the women and they projected onto me” (1997: 21). I felt the need to exchange an occasional story of my own with the participants in order for the process to be mutually respectful; I had to validate and confirm their concerns about me and I had to give of myself in order for the process to be as least exploitative as possible.

In some ways, because I was employed at the school in which I did my research, I attempted to conduct an institutional ethnography of the school from the standpoint of parents. Such a method “builds from a perspective located in people’s experience and in their daily lives and doings to an investigation of social relations and organization that are present, but not fully visible, in the everyday world” (Griffith and Smith 2005: 3).

Griffith and Smith argue for beginning at the local level with those who are active in the institution. We must understand institutions from the standpoint of those who are active in that institution and that is how I viewed the parents in my study (Griffith and Smith 2005: 4). But because my field notes were not always adequate, I did not conduct a full institutional ethnography.

I fully acknowledge that my sample is not necessarily representative of all of the parents whose children attend this school; all of my participants attended at least one meeting of the Family Council in the fall of 2007 or the spring of 2008 and the majority of parents at this school do not attend such meetings. But I felt the need to respect the constraints and desires of parents – I know that parents have many jobs, family situations, etc., to handle on a daily basis and I chose to interview only those who felt that they had time to give to me. Phillips, writing about parental participation, argues:

[T]hose who participate are always a skewed sub-set of those entitled to participate: skewed sometimes by gender, sometimes by race, and virtually always by social class...The skewing of participation is partly a matter of time, as when parents juggling the care of their children with long hours in employment find themselves cutting out all extraneous activities. More insidiously, it also reflects people's assumptions about their own competencies: whether they think they know anything about the issues under discussion, whether they think they have something worthwhile to say (2005: 87).

Of course I believe that all parents at the school have many worthwhile things to say, but again, I chose to speak to those who felt comfortable enough to volunteer to speak to me.

An Introductory Statement of the Problem

There is a great need for this kind of research, but all researchers must be aware of the meaning of what they do. Fine and Weis write:

The process of conducting research within schools to identify words that could have been said, talk that should have been nurtured, and information that needed to be announced suffers from voyeurism and perhaps the worst of post hoc academic arrogance. The researcher's sadistic pleasure in spotting another teacher's collapsed contradiction, aborted analysis, or silencing sentence was moderated only by the ever-present knowledge that similar analytic surgery could easily be performed on my own classes (2003: 37).

Any critique in this paper of the school, administrators, and teachers is a critique that I could easily make of my own career in education. One reason that I am interested in parental inclusion is because I know that I did not do enough to reach out to parents when I was a teacher. I am personally invested in the inclusion of parents because of my own childhood and my own mother's experiences with schools, but that does not mean that I have done no wrong as a teacher or as a researcher. Nonetheless, as Fine and Weis

address, this type of research is necessary and I hope to add important knowledge to the field.

In addition, casting a light on the struggles of these parents and on the inequalities in the system that affect them and their children is crucial because a paradigm of an ideal mother has been constructed in relation to schooling and this paradigm is based on “middle-class resources, time, and knowledge. Mothers who for whatever reason don’t fit the ideal (especially poor and working-class mothers) are exposed to the hazards of ‘guilt, invidious comparison, and anxiety,’ especially when children do not behave or perform in ways that fit the classroom order” (Luttrell 1997: 92). My work brings in many different “types” of parents – mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and fathers – and creates an argument for why the guilt should not fall on them. And this inclusion of many different caregivers is unusual in this type of research.

In her work, Lareau found that:

Educators at both schools believe parents should take a leadership role in solving their children’s educational problems. They complain about parents who do not take children’s problems ‘seriously’ enough to initiate contact with educators. In short, educators want contradictory behaviors from parents: deference and support, but also assertive leadership when children had educational problems (2003: 27).

Parents are often in such double binds that prevent them from using their voices; it is important that we listen to *them*, instead of only teachers, as many researchers in the literature do, to find out how the *parents* experience these double binds and how they choose to negotiate them in their children’s schools. It is common to assume that inner-city parents do not have the drive or skills to negotiate or challenge school practices.

Vincent and Martin, in *Activating Participation*, write that many “parental involvement schemes” do not truly examine the circumstances of families or the positive parenting practices in those families; nor do they attempt a collaborative needs analysis (2005: 118). And Winters writes:

Socioeconomic factors and traditional patterns of interaction frequently mitigate positive exchange between school personnel and their constituents in poor, urban communities. As a result, both, in defense, retreat. Parents avoid contact and are characterized as disinterested. Schools erect barriers that poor mothers perceive as insurmountable. Protected by the authority and power vested in their mission, schools operate routinely, while poor parents remain estranged (1993: xvii-xviii).

Parents in urban schools have strengths that aid the survival and the thriving of their children. Those parents must be recognized for such work, their contributions to schools must be recognized, and their needs and demands must be the driving force behind school reform. As Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti argue in *Funds of Knowledge*, “People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge. Our claim is that first-hand research experiences with families allow one to document this competence and knowledge” (2005: x). They argue that we must work to change perceptions of historically oppressed communities in order to acknowledge their authentic strengths and resources (2005: x). I wish for my research to be part of such an effort within the literature on parental inclusion and I hope that it is received in this way.

Literature Review

Cultural Capital and the Framing of Parental Responsibility

We must...criticiz[e] some of the basic ways our educational institutions currently operate. To do this, though, we need to understand much more

thoroughly the connection between education and the ideological, political, and economic spheres of society and how the school partakes in each of them (Apple 1995: 7).

A modern education theorist, Apple argues that the American education system fits within all other ideological and political spheres of society. Schools train students for how to behave and get along in the other spheres of society, and sometimes the education that they receive prohibits them from functioning in certain spheres.

Such theory links with other well-known sociological theorists. Bourdieu, for example, has famously addressed cultural capital, a key term in relation to education. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is “the informal social skills, habits, linguistic styles, and tastes that a person garners as a result of her or his economic resources” (Allan 2006: 178). Cultural capital can be objectified in material goods, it can be institutionalized in educational degrees or credentials, or it can be embodied in the way that we “perform” in the world and carry ourselves (Allan 2006: 178). If a student comes from a background of oppression, she may not have access to certain types of cultural capital or the “right” kinds of cultural capital. She then might be oppressed further by her school. According to Li, Bourdieu argues that “schools transmit middle-class ‘cultural capital’ from one generation to the next,” and, therefore, inner-city schools sometimes “filter out” the cultural capital of their students of color and other oppressed student populations (2008: 163). So schools neglect the cultural capital that disenfranchised students bring to school with them. According to Levinson and Holland, Bourdieu would argue that schools:

allow elite groups to maintain power by only recognizing as ‘intelligent’ their cultural capital, that is, their tastes for certain cultural products...Exams, rewards, and other disciplinary procedures ensure school success for those who already possess this particular ‘intelligence.’ Those who don’t, of course, stand a good chance of lower achievement, and even failure (1996: 6).

Many have written about how this issue of cultural capital affects parents. Reay writes in

Activating Participation:

Cultural capital is implicated in the ability of mothers to draw on a range of strategies in supporting their children’s schooling. Financial resources, confidence in relation to the educational system, educational knowledge and information about schooling all had a bearing on the extent to which mothers felt empowered to intervene in their child’s educational trajectory and the confidence with which they embarked on such action (2005: 31).

Vincent and Martin add:

[i]t is clear that parents differ greatly in resources of material, cultural, and social capital; in the quantity of material resources, but also in the nature of the social and cultural resources available to them. The possession and activation of these resources are extremely influential in determining parental relationship with the school, and the frequency, quality and nature of their interventions (2005: 114).

As Luttrell, in her study of working-class women and how schooling affects their identities, writes:

In one sense, the women’s stories support a view of schools as trading posts where students bring different sorts of ‘cultural capital,’ i.e., different kinds of knowledge, dispositions, linguistic codes, problem-solving skills, attitudes, and tastes, only some of which get rewarded or valued by school authorities. Those with the ‘right’ (i.e. legitimated) cultural capital fare the best in school. For example, the streetwise or commonsense knowledge that these women brought to the school was, in their view, at best disregarded and at worst ridiculed by the teachers...Such experiences confirm the importance of cultural capital, but the women’s stories show that there are personal, cultural, and institutional conflicts that frame students’ understandings of their lack of cultural capital which must be taken into account (1997: 5).

If schools do function in this way, then, parents in oppressed communities are automatically at a disadvantage because they do not have the cultural capital that is valued by the school system. Additionally, because they are deemed to be “lacking,” the parents then become *responsible* to help their children adapt to the cultural capital that the school espouses – they become responsible to help change their children, and oftentimes themselves. And if they do not, the school authorities and others with power will likely label these parents as permanently deficient and irresponsible.

Annette Lareau has studied parental involvement and how socioeconomic status affects the ways that parents choose to raise their children and interact with schools and other institutions. Many theorists within this field have addressed the challenging odds and the obstacles that parents face as deficits. Lareau argues, for example, that middle-class parents are able to use parental strategies that emphasize “concerted cultivation” while poor and working-class parents have to, or choose to, emphasize “natural growth” (2003: 3). These different approaches, according to Lareau, “appear to lead to the transmission of differential advantages to children” (2003: 5). Her implication is that middle-class children are advantaged as a result of the way their parents are able to raise them.

Lareau writes:

In sum, there is a paradox in the institutions that children and their families encounter. On the one hand, there are profound differences in the quality of services provided by institutions. On the other hand, institutions accept and promote the same standards regarding cultural repertoires. Thus, teachers placed a shared emphasis on the cultivation of children’s talents through organized activities, the importance of parental development of children’s

vocabulary, and the importance of responsive and positive parental participation in schooling. As we shall see, these standards privileged the cultural practices of middle-class families over those of their working-class and poor counterparts. This pattern made it more comfortable, and easier at times, for middle-class children and their parents to achieve their wishes (2003: 28).

Lareau describes the natural growth model of the working class and poor as involving “hanging out,” “rare questioning or challenging of adults by child,” “dependence on institutions,” “sense of powerlessness and frustration,” and “emerging sense of constraint on the part of the child” (2003: 31). This “model” of parenting is surely not appreciated by school authorities and it is these parents who face being labeled as “deficient” and “irresponsible.” Lareau writes that some of the strategies of “natural growth” parenting mean that children “are being given lessons in frustration and powerlessness” (2003: 245).

Others have critiqued Lareau. Maier, Ford, and Schneider write, “Taken together, our findings suggest that, with regard to parent/child interaction, claims of a coherent logic of child-rearing practice among middle-class families – and the corollary advantage it provides – are somewhat overstated” (2008: 144). And Li writes about immigrant families, “Instead, it is the complex workings of the family’s current class location, their prior class location, their cultural practices, as well as the neighborhood and school conditions, that influence how the parents educate their children and get involved in their schooling” (2008: 162). Li adds, “Therefore, it is necessary to avoid the family deficit model and situate the family’s parenting practices and schooling within their specific socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts” (2008: 162). Many others also argue that families themselves should be allowed to explain what those contexts are and how they

work to negotiate those contexts so as to ensure the survival of their children. In other words, the parents and families must be allowed to explain what they feel they are responsible for and what they feel they cannot be responsible for due to a lack of resources, etc.

My research aims to investigate, in part, how parents understand their supposed “lack” of cultural capital, which is assumed in much of dominant society, and how this determination of some parents as “lacking” influences how the parents interact with the school and how the school interacts with the parents. How does the dominant understanding of who has cultural capital, and who is lacking cultural capital, influence the way that parents understand their responsibilities to the school system and to their children?

Parental Involvement and the Framing of Parental Responsibility

Reviewing the literature, I uncovered many studies on “parental involvement,” but most did not include the authentic voices of parents. One study claimed to want to examine “the notion that minority parents don’t care about the education of their children” (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, and Dornbusch 1993: 108). While this study disproved that notion, the researchers used a questionnaire to include hundreds of parents from multiple high schools. Another study by St. John, Griffith, and Allen-Haynes looked at ten schools that were restructuring and interviewed administrators, teachers, and parents to see how they experienced the restructuring and the moves to increase “parental involvement” (1997: 7). They wrote about parents:

As parents volunteer in the schools, they begin to make changes in their parenting. These changes fit the socialization processes of parenting more closely with the child's experience of schooling. Some volunteers told us they changed the way they interacted with their children by following suggestions from teachers or by simply watching and noting the interactions between teachers and students...The volunteers' work coordinates their families' everyday practices more closely with those of the school (1997: 57).

So instead of the school officials listening to parents and adapting to their parenting practices, the parents were the ones who became responsible to change and conform to the practices of the schools. These researchers write that one of the lessons that emerged from their study was that "[e]mpowering parents to reclaim responsibility for their children's education can enhance the development of learning environments that foster powerful learning" (1997: 81). My research uncovered many such studies that place the responsibility on parents to adapt themselves in order to enhance their children's education.

Lareau writes:

The research reveals that family-school relationships vary between the working-class and upper-middle-class communities. Relations between working-class families and the school are characterized by *separation*. Because these parents believe that teachers are responsible for education, they seek little information about either the curriculum or the educational process, and their criticisms of the school center almost entirely on non-academic matters. Most working-class parents never intervene in their children's school program; their children receive a generic education (2000: 8).

She thus continues to describe working-class parents as lacking information and, she argues, "this created a fundamental separation between home and school" (2000: 54).

Others have made similar arguments that lead to the conclusion that parents are responsible to "fix" themselves to fit the norms or expectations of the school. Another

study that I uncovered in the literature claimed to address increasing student achievement through both parent involvement and teacher knowledge. This study advocated “parent-as-tutor training...[which] must include training of parents in verbal interaction techniques that promote cognitive and language development” (Simich-Dudgeon 1993: 194). Many studies advocate just such “training” or other similar policies in order to increase parental involvement and responsibility.

In yet another example, in her study, Chandra Muller attempted to look at the impact of “parent involvement” on test scores and grades (1993: 77). Instead of speaking to parents and students, she looked at quantitative data. Some of her findings included that parents with higher levels of education have students with higher test scores, mothers who work part-time, instead of full-time, have students with higher test scores, and parents who restrict television watching on weekdays have students with higher test scores. She writes, “In general, it seems that what parents do within the home makes a bigger impact on test scores than does what they do in relation to the school” (1993: 87). Most of these studies about parental involvement, then, conclude that parents are responsible to be involved and to ensure that they are raising their children in a way that conforms with school policies so that their children will do well within the institution of the school.

MCAS, Violence, and Safety

A major point of discussion in this research project is the MCAS (or the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System), which all students in the state must take. Many of the parents to whom I spoke had serious concerns about these tests – they

did not believe that they were fair assessments of students' knowledge and they also saw them as literal threats to their children's well being. In my analysis of this issue in the data and discussion sections of this paper, I attempt to make a link between these tests and the fact that many urban parents feel that they have to worry about their children's physical and mental safety when they are in school. I have found that not many theorists have addressed such a link between tests and safety, but I will discuss how a few have begun to make this link here.

Crozier writes in *Activating Participation* that parents have deep concerns about their children's education and some parents express this concern by saying that their children are being attacked. Crozier says that parents need to undertake emotional, domestic, and professional labor "in the support, defense, and protection of their children in the face of a system that is failing to meet their children's needs" (2005: 41). This theorist, then, does start to link a failing education system with "attacks" on children; I take this work further by discussing the state testing system and how parents understand it to be dangerous.

Citing Zorn, Fine and Weis write, "By segregating the academic voice from students' own voices, public schools do not only linguistic violence. The intellectual, social, and emotional substance that constitutes minority students' lives in this school was routinely treated as irrelevant, to be displaced and silenced" (2003: 26). They argue that schools do linguistic violence and emotional violence by silencing students. Citing Bourdieu, Levinson and Holland also argue that schooling can constitute "symbolic violence" on oppressed students because arbitrary knowledge is made to seem universal;

this leads students to see themselves as limited and to silence themselves (1996: 6). I would like to take this line of thought and carry it forward through an examination, through the parents' voices, of the MCAS.

Fine and Weis begin to make this connection between high-stakes tests and potential physical harm to children. They write:

At the moment, as the numbers of juveniles in criminal justice facilities swell, as high-stakes testing proliferates and dropout rates spike for the first time in a decade, we recognize that the costs of inequitable and damaging public education are painfully high for poor youth, and particularly youth of color in urban America (2003: 178).

So with the advent of high-stakes tests, more students are dropping out. Those children are then in more danger to suffer from poverty and/or to end up in the prison-industrial complex. I hope to take this connection between tests and physical harm further. I believe that my method of speaking to parents and allowing their words to address the issues of safety and violence provides new and relevant information.

Curriculum and Homework

The parents in this study believe that their ability to assist with their children's learning is crucial. Many others have studied how parents understand themselves in relation to the system of learning and schooling. Luttrell studied working-class and poor women and how they understood their own identities as students in relation to their children. She writes, "Their stories depict schooling as a process that routinely splits into opposites legitimate and illegitimate knowledge, idealized and devalued students, good and bad teachers, and effective and ineffective mothers" (1997: 10). This statement is interesting because it links knowledge with parenting – if you have the "wrong"

knowledge, then, you cannot be a good parent, according to dominant discourse. If a parent cannot help with a child's homework, then, that parent is deficient.

But often in “under-performing” schools, students are not learning what they need to. Crozier writes in *Activating Participation* that “black parents are frequently faced with the need to make up for the deficiencies of the school system as best they can” (2005: 47). This job of making up for deficiencies is “professional labor” for parents – they must help children with homework and perform other “compensatory measures” when the school does not do enough (2005: 48). So parents, when the schools are failing them and their children, expect themselves (and are expected by others) to step in and assist with teaching their children. But they usually are not involved in decisions regarding curriculum.

On the need to listen to parents and families regarding curriculum, Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez write, “Our claim is that by capitalizing on household and other community resources, we can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools” (2005: 71). They define the historical and cultural knowledge and skills that families and households possess as “funds of knowledge” (2005: 72). They assert that households have “ample cultural and cognitive resources with great potential utility for classroom instruction” (2005: 75). They argue that teachers must work to know the whole child, including the child's home context, and that teachers are obligated to look at their relationships with children and family members as reciprocal. If teachers expect parents to assist with

schooling, then teachers should know what the parents' expectations are, as well (2005: 74). They write that as things stand now:

Rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to school and using it as a foundation for learning, the emphasis has been on what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge sanctioned by the schools. This emphasis on 'disadvantages' has provided justification for lowered expectations in schools and inaccurate portrayals of the children and their families (2005: 90).

Browning-Aiken adds to this discussion: "My critical assumption is that educational institutions underutilize the cultural resources and experiences of their working-class minority students, but that teachers possess the skills and creativity needed to draw on this knowledge to enhance their curriculum and their home-school relationships" (2005: 168). By speaking to actual parents and working to illuminate their points of view on curriculum and schoolwork, I hope to be a part of the movement towards incorporating parents' actual voices and wisdom into schools. And this incorporation can only enhance the learning that goes on in schools.

One study that I uncovered claimed to examine "homework-focused parenting practices that positively affect student achievement" (Clark 1993: 86). This study's research questions were:

What are the specific homework-related practices (behaviors and attitudes) that parents engage in to support their children's homework endeavors? What are the specific parenting practices that differentiate parents of high- and low-achieving students? How are parenting practices affected by specific demographic variables: parents' education, family structure (intact vs. mother only), and student's ethnic background? (Clark 1993: 87).

The study concluded that there are “uneven levels of parenting skills” between high and low-achieving students (Clark 1993: 103). These research questions emphasize the individual behaviors of the parents but they do not examine how homework affects parents or how they interact with homework and curriculum. My research, in part, attempts to do just that.

Fine and Weis write, “Self-proclaimed as fortresses against students’ communities, city schools offer themselves as ‘the only way out of Harlem’ rather than in partnership with the people, voices, and resources of that community” (2003: 16). They later add:

They [teachers] taught with curricular and pedagogical techniques they hoped would soothe students and smooth social contradictions. Many would probably have not considered conversation about social class, gender, or race politics relevant to their courses or easily integrated into their curricula. Some would argue that inclusion of these topics would be ‘political’ – whereas exclusion was not. One could have assumed that they benignly neglected these topics (2003: 21).

Some of the most important knowledge for marginalized students, then, is being excluded from school curriculum. Anyon argues that even with standardized curriculum in many districts today, after the passage of No Child Left Behind, “social stratification of knowledge is possible” (2008: 189). Of course, parents are invested in changing this situation.

R.W. Connell argues that there are three principles of curricular justice – first, curriculum should serve “the interests of the least advantaged” (1993: 43). Next, it must truly prepare students to participate in democratic processes. He argues that learning practices “should be cooperative...In this respect, justice would be significantly advanced by banning all grading and competitive testing during the compulsory years of schooling”

(1993: 46). Lastly, he argues that curriculum should be engaged in the production of equality (1993: 47). I hope to make the point, in my work that follows, that parents want and deserve to be a part of making such demands. And curriculum and learning will be just only when parents are thus involved.

Data and Discussion

How Parents View Their Own Responsibilities and the Responsibilities of Teachers

Parents' Responsibilities for Children's School Success

Parents were almost always quick to talk about how they viewed their responsibilities and they emphasized their own duties much more than the duties of teachers – these parents place much of the burden and responsibility for their children's educations on themselves and they enforce this “mindset” onto other parents in their community, as well. In this section I will discuss some recurring themes within the larger theme of responsibility: being a constant presence in the schools, “creating” responsibility in the teachers, and listening to both sides in a conflict between children and teachers. In addition to these main findings, I also will discuss how parents blamed themselves and others for not living up to these responsibilities and how parents enforced certain norms and expectations on other parents.

I asked parents what advice they would give to other parents based on their experiences in the schools and I will incorporate that advice (which often manifested as criticism) into this section, along with instances in which parents were reluctant to criticize anyone or anything other than themselves. Again, they were enforcing certain norms and expectations on themselves and on other parents. The reluctance to criticize

anyone other than parents, particularly teachers, likely occurs because the parents have overwhelming feelings of personal responsibility for their children's education. I will begin this section with the theme of having a constant presence in the school.

A Physical Presence

Almost every parent brought up the need to be available and to visit the school, either through classroom observations, Family Council meetings, or open houses. The parents seemed to stress the need to have a physical presence in the school and if they did not have such a physical presence, they inevitably blamed themselves for any problems that their children experienced in school. One parent argued that if a child is out of control, that child's parent should be required to come into the school for a full day and observe the classes in which the child is out of control. This parent acknowledged the extreme difficulty that this would cause for working parents, but she nonetheless suggested that such a visit would be necessary. The same parent also argued for more mandatory meetings for parents; as of now, parents are required to attend an open house at the beginning of ninth grade, but this parent argued for more such required meetings. Another parent also argued that parents must go to school and sit in on classes if they see something happening or if the child's grades are slipping. This parent believes that it is vital for more parents to be visible and present in the schools: "And um, the schools, you know, they have the Parent Councils but very few parents show up. You know, if you got, like say over 200, 300 students in your school and only 5 parents show up, something's wrong" (B1 p. 8). This parent later said:

You don't normally get the right parents cause the parents that are concerned are the ones that come to the meetings. The parents that need to come to the

meetings don't come, and those are the ones that the kids are having problems – they just don't come. I can understand working parents – I work but I will take time off if I have to, you know, to come and uh, and sit in a meeting or whatever, you know (B1 pg. 15).

Again, the physical presence of parents in classrooms and at meetings is deemed to be very important – most of the parents saw this as one of their responsibilities. Only one parent suggested that schools may not be welcoming environments for parents. But such a suggestion that schools may not be locations in which parents always feel welcome was not common. One parent began to discuss an issue with the school that she was upset about – her child was involved in a serious conflict with another student and no one at the school contacted her. She said, “I think there's things that they do need to notify parents, um, so...I think [the school] has failed in that totally. But that, that's why you have to come to the meetings and you have to come up to the school” (C2 p. 4). Despite the fact that this parent felt that the school officials did not live up to their responsibilities to her and her child, she still placed the responsibility on herself (and other parents) to be present in the school.

The necessity of being a physical presence in the school was repeated by almost every one of the nine parents. One parent told me a story about her observation day at the school – she went to every class with her child. During one class period, due to an inappropriate teaching strategy, the students began to behave in an out-of-control manner. The parent then had to leave the room and get a school administrator to come into the classroom and restore order. The parent also told me that the classroom structure (or lack thereof) of this teacher often prevented her child from getting the help he needed. But

due to the parent's previous presence in the school and in this particular classroom, perhaps it is now easier for her to place the responsibility on herself for dealing with this issue. If her presence was required previously in this class, in order to help restore control, it is easy to see why she would now feel personally responsible to continue to be physically present inside the school in order to ensure the safety and learning of her child.

A parent in the focus group spoke about an incident at her child's former middle school – a teacher failed the entire class because he was upset about the students' behavior. One of the things that shocked the parent about this incident was the fact that most of the other parents didn't do anything, according to her. But she physically went to the school to fix her child's grade:

There's parents that didn't say a thing, like, one of her friends at the time, I called the parent, and he was like, 'I'm mad,' but he never went up to the school and said nothing. I went up to the school and I met with the principal and I met with everybody else I could meet with and he fixed her grade, so...

Many of the parents I spoke to felt the same way – they placed the burden on themselves to be present and visible in the school.

Motivating Teachers to Do Their Jobs

I think if parents be in contact with school, and they [school authorities] going to feel like, 'you know what, we should do better for these children,' because the parents care about their children. But if you don't walk in the building and let them know that you want your kids to move on, they're going to figure, 'you know what, I don't think we have to do anything with these kids. The parents don't care, why should we care?' But if you've been there, then you let them know...parents concerned, then you want the best future for your kids. I think they will feel like, 'ok, let me do extra work and help this children cause they have a parent's concern (B2 p. 8).

Many parents see themselves as advocates – advocates who bear great responsibility for how the teachers view and treat their children. Many parents implied

that they feel that they must assert the rights and needs of their children in order for teachers to feel as though they must do their jobs well with those children.

One parent told me that she tells every one of her children's teachers to be in touch with her if they see any problems or if any issues with the children arise. The parent tells them that she is always available and she will drop everything to help with a problem at the school. It is as if she has to make this known and if she does not, the teachers will not feel obligated to get in touch with her or to do as much as they can for the child – she has to assert her identity as a “good” mother in order for the teachers to be responsible with her children. And when this reciprocity of responsibility from teachers has not happened, she feels let down because she was fulfilling her own responsibilities and she expected teachers to do the same. Another parent told me that she arranges to speak regularly with her child's teachers. When I asked her about a comment I heard from a few other parents – that sometimes teachers overstep and “parent” their students – she said, “it's depending, like, how you trust your kids, how you represent yourself to the teacher, and let the teacher know that you can be free any time, whatever happens, you can be there for your kid” (B2 p. 3). Thus she implied that if a parent did not represent herself to be responsible and available, the teacher would be justified to step into a parenting role with that child.

Other parents implied that a teacher would be justified in ignoring or neglecting some of the needs of a particular child if that child's parent never advocated for the child or made herself available to the teacher. One parent in the focus group said:

I do feel that, um, parents that are not...involved, um, or that don't have communication with the teachers, um, I think their children are treated a little

differently, though, as well, you know, um...Like say, a parent that doesn't communicate or doesn't get involved, then that child is kind of like, ok, well, the parents don't care, you know, so, they're kind of like left...

A focus group participant responded:

Those are the children that raise their hand for an hour and the teacher answers everybody else's question but theirs...and sometimes the teacher doesn't care for the child, but I think when you have a job to do, you gotta throw all that nonsense aside about not liking a student and stuff, cause that is not going to help that child.

Another parent told me that the teachers give her advice on ways to help her children; this parent also goes to the teachers and advises them on how to help her children. She stressed that all parents must show the teachers that they care and that they are involved: "I mean, if you never come, teachers never see you, this and that, you know, I think they'll feel, well, you know, 'the parent's not really interested.' Then they really might be but they just can't get there, so you can, you know, communicate with them by phone, by notes" (D1 p. 11). Another parent adds:

But what it comes down to is the onus is on the parents to reach out to the schools. I know, if we didn't make the effort, we're not gonna get the same communication, um, from the staff cause they're just overwhelmed...the parents who don't communicate with the schools, um, tend not to get as much support or to get, um, the issues confronting their kids, um, addressed (E1 p. 2).

These parents believe that if they do not advocate loudly, the teachers are justified in not fulfilling their responsibility to educate each and every child. Or if such an abdication of responsibility is not completely justified, it is at least accepted by parents. The parents' responsibilities, then, according to them, hold great consequences for their children.

Listening to Both Sides: The Mediator Role

Many parents argue that to be responsible parents, they need to listen to both sides when a conflict arises between their children and a teacher or an administrator. They said that they talk to the teacher if the child complains about how he is being treated in that teacher's class, they investigate the child's complaint, and they listen and consider both sides before making a judgment. One parent said:

You know, and if your child tells you one thing, always try to back it up with the second story. Not their story, the second, and I did that with all my kids...I have to find out from the horse's mouth, you know what I'm saying, the teacher, I'm quite sure she's not lie – they might tell me, exaggerate some things, but they're not going to lie. So you know, it's like, you just can't, um, send them to school every day and not know what's going on in the school (D1 p. 11).

Another parent said:

And they [parents] have to support the teachers, you know...is a teacher always gonna be right about a student? No, but a student isn't always gonna be right about the teacher, either, so you just can't take a student's word when a student comes home and says 'this teacher is doing this to me.' You have to come up, find out what's going on, sit with both, and listen to both sides, you know, and um, show that teacher respect, because no matter what, that teacher's still here, you know, and you have to respect that teacher, because if you show disrespect to the teacher, the student is gonna show it...That's, that's, that's the main thing, is parents getting involved, ok? And, really knowing your kid (C1 p. 4).

This recurring theme of listening to both sides – which almost half of the parents brought up at least once – is connected to the idea that parents must have a physical presence in the schools. When they do visit the school, either by attending meetings or observing classes, many parents believe that they must not be there solely as advocates for their children because they cannot automatically side with their children when conflicts arise. They must listen to all sides and appear to be impartial judges. One can imagine that this behavioral requirement for these parents and for the other parents upon whom they

enforce this expectation would be very difficult if they felt their children were being treated unjustly. But according to my interviews, if the parents were not able to abide by this requirement, they would feel that they were acting irresponsibly and jeopardizing their children's education.

Parents seem to see themselves as the primary holders of responsibility for their children's education. To exercise that responsibility, they must be in the schools, they must prove to the teachers that their children deserve attention and assistance, and they must listen to both sides of all stories in order to be legitimate in their interactions with the school.

Criticizing and Advising Other Parents: The Enforcer Role

I asked interview participants what advice they would give to other parents whose children attend this high school or whose children are going to start attending this high school. While the parents addressed a myriad of issues when answering this question, every parent discussed how other parents need to be responsible and involved in the school. And several parents addressed ways in which other parents are not involved enough and are not being responsible enough. Many parents also addressed ways in which other parents are not living up to their responsibilities in response to other questions – the advice and critiques of other parents were a recurring theme throughout the interviews.

Parents are willing to accept that they must live up to the expectations of society in terms of how parents should be involved in their children's schools. And the parents were willing to serve as enforcers of the dominant norms of parenting and to insist that

other parents live up to such norms, as well. The dominant norms for parental involvement are based on a middle-class existence – they assume a certain amount of free time and the ability to negotiate with a boss for time off, for example (Griffith and Smith 2005). But parents seem to be willing to enforce these norms on themselves and others, despite the fact that they are often impossible to maintain.

In line with an earlier finding, many parents said that they would advise other parents to be visible and present in the schools. One parent said:

I don't think the administrator doesn't communicate with the parents. I think it's the parents' fault because if you have your children in the school, you don't have to wait until the school call you. You should at least take one day and walk to the school and ask, 'how are my children doing?' If you know your children doesn't do good, you should ask, 'what I can help? What can we do for my children?' (B2 p. 4).

Reflecting another earlier theme about motivating teachers, many parents said they would urge other parents to tell teachers that they are always available and show teachers that they care. Parents also stressed the need for other parents to show teachers respect and support. They implied that parents need to prove themselves as having the right aims and good intentions with teachers. And when advising other parents, this need to prove one's parental commitment carried over to the children themselves, as can be seen in this parent's advice to other parents:

And, even if you're not educated, get involved. You know what I mean? I mean, you can't just come out and say that, but, even if you don't feel as though you can help them academically, just get involved. Show your involvement with your student, with your child, and then support your teachers, you know... You know, you have to, you have to get involved, um, just get involved, you know, um, come to the parent-teachers' meetings, um, is it going to make a difference? We don't know. You know, ok, but, it shows your child that you're interested in what's going on with them. Even if it's a pretense, it still shows (C1 p. 20).

Another parent advised:

[J]ust because someone hasn't called you back in five minutes...or that day, doesn't mean that they don't care, you know, they just may be busy and caught up. And sometimes, maybe, how can you support that, that teacher to help, you know, to help your child get through it...sometimes some parents just have a, you know, a thing with, 'you know, these teachers'...you need to ask yourself, 'what is it that I can do better...to better support my child and maybe this teacher?' (D2 p. 14).

And in the focus group, one parent wrote on the poster with the question about communication: "Yes, parents need to be more involved – it takes a whole community to raise a child and you want your child to see that you care." Another wrote, "Yes, I believe all parents or guardians must speak up for their child, and that is the way it should be." Finally, in an interview, a parent advised that other parents should be as engaged as possible because "it makes a huge difference and it sends the message both to the children and to the school administration and the staff that, that the parent really cares...if that message is not sent...unfortunately, the student is in a deficit situation already" (E1 p. 12).

This last statement is perhaps the most interesting. This parent seems to be arguing that it is the parent that sets the tone and lays the groundwork for her child's education – if she does not do this, her child is automatically in a "deficit situation." The parents are putting the pressure on themselves and enforcing pressure on other parents to demonstrate caring and responsibility within the school environment. They must advocate for their children and urge others to assist their children in return. If they do not, their children will be at a serious disadvantage. Parents are willing to enforce this norm on other parents. In addition to advising other parents to advocate for their children

in the schools, a few interview participants also advised other parents to listen to both sides when a conflict arises between a school official and their child. So again, these participants are holding other parents to the same expectations to which they hold themselves.

Many interview participants told me that they are concerned that many parents whose children attend this high school are *not* involved or responsible enough; these responses tell us much about the expectations which parents enforce upon themselves and others. For example:

You know, I don't know, but the way I see like, we have a parent meeting every month, but you don't see that many. You see 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, you don't see that many. So the way I feel, I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, but the way I feel, like the way I've been trying to help my kids, then I feel like, you're not a parent, you should be in this school at least once to see what's going on because you don't go to the meeting, you don't come to the school, you don't know what's going on (B2 p. 5).

And another parent said:

[Parents should] be more involved, you know, um, parents need to really get more involved. They need to come up if they don't understand something, and it's not going to be easy for a lot of parents, but they need to come here if there's classes that will teach you the basic English, basic math, you know, which the kids aren't learning basic math (C1 p. 4).

A parent in the focus group, when discussing what parents can do to support their children's education, said:

We need to do a workshop for parents on, and we need to put it in a way that's not offensive, but you know, being more interested in your children's education. We need – seriously, we need a workshop like that. Parents need to know how important, what they mean – they don't get it, like, they don't understand...they need a workshop, I'm sorry.

Parents hold themselves and other parents to certain high and often unwavering expectations – go to the school, prove to the teacher that your child deserves attention, and listen to all sides in order to respect and support the teachers. They participate in the enforcement of dominant norms. And if they see these norms being neglected by other parents, they are willing to critique them.

Not all parents argued that all parents can meet these expectations – some were able to see the inherent difficulties involved in parenting in the inner city and in an urban education system:

It's placed on urban schools, you know, and it's like, well, it's up to you. Well, sometimes it's not always up to you, ok? Because, um, if the state is controlling that, it's not always up to you, you know. Can your parent afford to send you to a private school? Probably not. Do most of them probably want to? I think any parent that, I think any parent that has any feelings want to see better for their kid. I don't care what they were – they were druggies, whatever – I think they want to see better for their kids, especially inner-city parents, you know, um, you know, um, and it can be discouraging. It can be very, um, it's very misleading, you know, because if you, if you don't get involved and if you don't understand – that's the other thing is understanding what was happening to your child, what the state is doing to your child, because it is a government-controlled system, so it is what they're putting on your child, ok, what they're allowing to happen to your child. And, I think there would be an uproar – I do – if they really understood, but they don't understand because they've already, like I said, a lot of them have that “given up” attitude, and it's, it's sad (C1 p. 13).

This parent argues that all parents do want a good education for their children. She acknowledges that this is not always possible due to the inequities of the education system. However, she still puts some of the responsibility on the parents themselves, implying that if more parents made an effort to understand what is going on in their children's schools and if more parents did not have a “given up attitude,” they could be more involved in demanding change.

Other parents struggle against the way school officials perceive them. One parent, when discussing what the school administrators can do to reach out to parents, acknowledged why it is difficult for many parents to be involved:

one thing's that I noticed that, for some, some people, coming into a, um, coming into a school and coming into a meeting may not make people, um, defensive but it may make people, um, uncomfortable...I guess that, um, one is maybe trying to meet parents where they're at, maybe calling up parents and talking to them and asking them why they don't come (D2 p. 5).

Shortly after making this statement, this parent said:

[School officials are] probably used to, um, making some major decisions without parents. You know, I know this, there's a lack of parent involvement, but this is a parent that is involved, so, you know, I don't want that assumption, um, to be made, even if I don't understand certain things, I'm still, I'm still involved and try to understand to the best of my ability (D2 p. 6).

Finally, another parent said of the drop-out crisis:

And if the parents are not pushing, you know, we know why the parents in the system are, are challenged themselves and cannot really do their jobs. You know, they have a hard time supporting uh, their, their own children to come to school. And if they're not being communicated to about issues, they're not even aware of issues until it becomes a crisis (E1 p. 7).

These statements demonstrate that not all parents always place the blame entirely on themselves and other parents – they are willing to lessen the enforcement at times. The interview participants and other parents understand the complexity of what is going on and they understand that there are many barriers – economic, social, psychological, and political – that prevent parents from being deemed equal partners in the eyes of school officials. And yet, for the most part, they continue to enforce certain norms and expectations on themselves and others based on the demands of dominant society.

The picture becomes more complex when we look at the ways in which parents discuss the responsibilities of teachers.

Teachers' Responsibilities for Children's School Success

Many parents discussed the responsibilities of teachers as contingent upon the responsibilities of parents – they seemed to say that in order for teachers to be fully responsible to a child, that child's parent must prove that she is invested in the child's education and that she will do anything that is necessary to help her child.

Parents also understand teachers to have specific responsibilities and duties. A few central themes emerged in the interviews. Many parents discussed that the role of teachers in the high school, and in general, is to help and motivate the students. Many also stressed that teachers must talk to the parents and keep them informed of what is going on, a theme which I also address in the next section of this paper. Interestingly, parents tended to “pardon” teachers for not getting vital work done and then explain why it is so hard for teachers to accomplish certain goals within the school and with students. In this section, I discuss the theme of teacher responsibility as posed by parents and then I look at how parents reframe this issue by justifying why it is that those teachers cannot fulfill their responsibilities to children.

Helping and Motivating Students

Parents stressed that teachers need to help students and push them to get through school. One parent suggested that teachers should give more work to a child who is bored, help students who are struggling, keep students back during lunch if they are behind, and keep insisting that students not give up. One parent said that teachers (and

administrators) must tell kids how they can follow the right direction. One parent expressed frustration over the fact that teachers do not always provide extra help when she requests it:

That's like when he, certain things he'll bring home, like, they're teaching kids math totally different, and um...so um, I'll say, 'you need to get examples from your teacher – more examples.' Um...there's not enough information, you know what I'm saying? I don't, I, to me, I, and I'll send him back and say, 'you need to ask for this, this, this, and this.' Do I always get that? No, you know (C1 p. 3).

Here, the parent is abiding by her responsibilities by helping her child with homework and she is asking the teacher to be a part of that effort, as well, to ensure that the student can get his work done and learn the material. But this parent, when I asked her what teachers should do better, immediately suggested that teachers' hands are tied and that they often do not get enough support from the school committee and from parents. So while teachers were criticized by some parents for not providing enough help and support for students' learning, this criticism often quickly turned into "excuses" for those teachers, as I will address later.

Another parent addressed her concern that teachers, in fact, are not doing enough to motivate and support students:

I just think that the, the teaching and the things that are going on in Boston Public Schools, these kids are not into it, they're not, you know. I mean, most kids nowadays are not really interested in school. So I don't know whether it's the teachers are not teaching them things that they want to hear or doing things that, I don't know, to get kids in tune to, to school. I don't know what it is (D1 p. 7).

But this parent went on to speak about one of her children whose teachers are always offering her help but "she's just not in tune to get it," so the parent tells the teachers,

“you can only do so much. If she wants to come, she’ll come, and do what she has to do” (D1 p. 7). And when one of her other children was thinking about dropping out, the parent felt that the teachers “gave their hands up, they didn’t want to deal with her no more” (D1 p. 8). The teachers told the parent, “she just doesn’t do anything and um, we’re just not going to bother with her, you know. So, that was that” (D1 p. 8). This parent believed that these teachers were right and that no one could have changed the student’s mind. As evidenced by this parent’s progression through her thoughts, many parents seem to be conflicted about the responsibility of teachers to help and motivate students. They know that teachers should be doing these major tasks – inspiring and motivating students to do their best and to stay in school – but the parents are reluctant to lay blame as to why this does not always happen. They want teachers to offer help and assistance to their children, but at the same time, some parents told me that they acknowledge that teachers can’t do it all and they can’t force students to accept their help. This last parent expressed a belief that something is inherently wrong with the education system in Boston, because most students are not interested in what is going on in the schools, and yet she was willing to pardon a group of teachers who openly gave up on her child when she was on the verge of dropping out.

One parent told a story about a teacher who would not give her child the paper that he needed in class. The child then misbehaved, the teacher called the parent, and the parent told the child to apologize. She was fulfilling her role as a mediator. But she was upset that the teacher had not given her child the tools he needed to succeed in class because that is a teacher’s job. This parent is willing to help the teachers – she told me

other stories of hearing teachers out when they called and doing what they asked of her – but in return, she asks that they support her children and help them get through school.

Another parent expressed her concern over the lack of help available to students:

Um, if she is struggling, she said she, you know, she tried to explain it and she said she, when she's here, nobody never listens, like never the teachers and she says, like, you have to have a tantrum or you have to, you know, explode or make a scene, you know. She says that, um...the help is not here like she would like it. Cause she's having trouble on something, she said she can't get the help she needs. So I guess um, I don't know if the teachers just don't have time, it's a little bit more help with the kids, um, but she was struggling for a long time, and of course I have to come up. You know what I mean? It shouldn't have to be that, if she says she's struggling (C2 p. 6).

In this case, the lack of help available to this student led to the responsibility returning to the parent – she felt that she had to come up to the school and advocate for her daughter in order to ensure that extra help became available from teachers. She was fulfilling what she saw as her responsibilities and she only wanted the teachers to do the same by assisting her daughter in getting through some difficult material. But here, as in other cases, as I will address further, the parent began to make excuses for the teachers and expressed a reluctance to continue the critique.

Informing Parents

Almost every parent spoke about the need for teachers to keep parents informed and aware of what is going on at the school and in the classroom. One parent always tells teachers to be in touch and let her know if they see any problems with her child's homework or behavior; she said that teachers need to ensure that parents get the information they need:

[M]ailing they say is expensive, you know, um, but there has to be some kind of mechanism that you can get through to the parents because some of the parents, half of the time they don't get the information that they need to get. And, that's a concern of mine....Um, like I have email, but my email's been down so they've been sending stuff to me and they say, well, "you haven't responded." My email's not working, you know, so and otherwise I'd say, "you got my phone number – call me on the phone." You know, if you can't talk that moment, just leave a message and I'll return your call (B1 p. 8).

She believes that communicating with parents is a primary responsibility of the teachers.

Another parent made an agreement with teachers to stay in touch in order to help her child:

[S]o actually, I don't have no complaining to say about teachers being bad to my kid because what I realize as a parent, I feel like if a teacher call me and tell me anything about my kid, it's because he want my kid to move on. Because if they don't care about your children, they let your children sit on the chair, don't do nothing, and at the end of the year, you got what you got. If they call you, they honor you...so that mean he call your attention, make sure you put your feet on and help your kid to move on (B2 p. 4).

This parent is affirming the belief that "good" teachers who do their jobs responsibly will be in touch with parents and thus honor their obligations to those parents. But interestingly, she believes that the teacher, by communicating with a parent, puts responsibility back on that parent to "help your kid to move on."

Another parent expressed her dismay because she does not believe that teachers live up to their responsibility to keep parents informed. She has been upset because teachers at this school have not told her about issues that her child was having:

And um...it was, maybe the teachers had more time, I don't know what, why [the school] can't communicate with the parents more than like her elementary school teacher did. I mean, I don't get emails, stuff in the mail. I get phone calls if there was ever a problem [at the elementary school]. Here, I have to call. You know, [my child] has to come and tell me and say, 'blah blah blah,' then I have to come up here, and I think that's the only difference (C2 p. 6).

She also argued that teachers should communicate with parents well in advance of report cards coming out, particularly if a student is going to fail a class, so that parents can do something about the impending failure. This parent, like others, however, was quick to discuss possible reasons for why teachers do not or cannot live up to this responsibility of keeping parents informed about their children's progress. So while she is highly critical of the commitment of teachers to keep her informed about her child, she is quick to lessen her critique by justifying the failures of teachers. Similarly, another parent discussed the importance of teachers reaching out to parents – she suggested that they and other school officials should do outreach to parents to encourage them to come to Family Council meetings and other school events. She addressed the disappointment she felt when a group of teachers did not inform her of an important meeting regarding her child:

Um, but, you know, those are the only issues I have and I'm pretty sure that, um, a side of that is they're probably dealing with, um...they're probably used to, um, making some major decisions without parents. You know, I know this, there's a lack of parent involvement, but this is a parent that is involved, so, you know, I don't want that assumption, um, to be made, even if I don't understand certain things, I'm still, I'm still involved and try to understand to the best of my ability (D2 p. 6).

This parent is reinforcing her belief that teachers must keep parents informed by relaying a bad experience she had when teachers did not live up to that responsibility. However, she couches her critique in a potential reason for the teachers' lack of communication with her. This pardoning of teachers' irresponsibility will be elaborated on in the next section of this paper.

Lastly, in relation to the responsibility of teachers to keep parents informed, one parent said:

But if there's something going on in the school where the student's not performing and there seems to be, uh, something, perhaps, outside of, of, of the immediate environment that's impacting that student, I think a caring teacher should reach out and say, and ask the student what's going on and try to get a sense of that. And also, at the same time, reach out to the parents to say, "look, you know, your, your son, your daughter's not doing well and there's something going on, we need to figure it out." The teacher needs to certainly be proactive, but not proactive in the way of preempting the, the involvement, the decisions of the parent. They should be able to, be reaching out to the parent (E1 p. 9).

This parent acknowledges the importance of teachers making connections with the parents, both to keep them informed of any concerns they have about that parent's child and to ensure that the parent can be involved in any decisions that are made about the child. If teachers are responsible to parents in this way, parents will feel as though they are equitable partners in making decisions about their children's futures. The majority of parents believe teachers should keep parents aware and informed of what is going on with their children, and yet parents have expressed disappointment because many teachers don't seem to carry out this responsibility.

Pardoning and Excusing Teachers

Parents gave reasons to pardon or justify the fact that teachers often do not perform many different responsibilities, including the two responsibilities that were discussed here – to help and motivate students and to keep parents informed. This section will further demonstrate this pattern in which parents excuse the failures of teachers.

One parent talked consistently about the fact that the teachers' and administrators' "hands are tied." This idea of someone's "hands being tied," or not having the power or agency to do something, is a reality for teachers in the current educational system, as well

as an excuse that parents are quick to apply to teachers, even when it might not apply to a particular situation. The parent who used this phrase, when asked what her child thinks of the school, said, “He loves it, he loves it, you know, and of course I can always see changes that should be happening, you know, but their hands are tied too because budgets, so...” (C1 p. 1). When asked what the teachers could do better in order to help parents, she said, “Well the teachers’ hands are kind of tied, because they have to go by what the school committee tells them to do” (C1 p. 3). When asked what she thinks about the job that administrators are doing in terms of reaching out to parents, she said, “but it still comes down to their hands are tied, you know, um...Last night I was at a meeting at this program he goes to and, the budget cuts, I mean, who controls it? The state. There’s nothing you can do about that” (C1 p. 5). When asked what advice she would give to parents whose children are going to attend this school, she said:

Come here with a positive attitude. Um, support the teachers. Their hands are tied – support your teachers, cause they’re here to help your child...Are all of them going to be a hundred percent? No, but most of them. Any person who chooses education today, any person...you have to give them credit, cause would I come in? Pssh, no. Kids don’t respect you, the parents don’t respect you, sometimes you’re taking your life in your hands (C1 p. 20).

Although this parent did notice several problems within the school, and she did make pointed critiques at times, she still tended to justify or explain away the inadequacies of the school, the teachers, and the administrators with this metaphor of hands being tied. She believes that sometimes the officials’ hands are tied because of money and budgets, sometimes their hands are tied because of higher committees, and sometimes their hands are tied simply by the conditions in which they are working.

When talking about issues of safety and her concerns about the security of the school, another parent said that increasing security “might cost them more than it’s really worth – you know, all the schools are on a budget, they’re doing so much that they can do” (A2 p. 16). While this parent did not explicitly use the symbol of hands being tied, she did express the belief that school officials have done all that is possible within their budget and that makes her accept the fact that the safety of students is not always guaranteed. I assume that safety is one of the primary concerns of all parents, and yet parents still were willing to pardon the fact that the school does not seem to be doing enough in this arena. Parents told me other stories of being willing to understand the shortcomings of the school based on the fact that the budget is limited. One parent’s feelings about the school had changed over the last few months before the interview because her child was not getting the services that he required. Although this is a serious critique of the school that is legally justified, the parent was quick to remove some of the blame from teachers and school officials during her discussion of this issue:

Um, I don’t think he’s getting the help that he really needs, you know, um, he’s in a, he’s a special needs, um, he’s not severe special needs but he does have special needs and I don’t think he gets the service that he needs. And my whole thing is, I don’t want to see him set up to fail, cause I don’t believe in failure, I don’t care if you don’t have the budget – there’s a way, you know, and um, that’s my, that’s where I got a little discouraged, because, um, you know, he, he learns at a different pace, so, he needs, and his comprehensive skills are not where they should be and, um...that has kind of deterred me. But, at the same time, when I think about him being in a bigger school, I have to outweigh, you know what I mean? So, it just makes it more added work for me, you know, because now I have to find out how they doing something to help him understand it, you know what I’m saying? So I think, if he, he’s not getting what I think he should be getting, you know, but there’s probably other kids like him that’s not getting what they should be getting, you know, and like I said, is it purposely done? No, it’s just budget again, you know, but uh, I don’t know. I don’t know what the administrative,

uh, system can do, as far as for the school, can do to get more help in, I don't know, you know. But that has, that has made me just sit back and say, you know, I was hoping this would happen but this is what's happening, you know, so (C1 p. 7).

This parent goes through an interesting progression of thoughts in this passage. She states that her child does not get the help that he needs and that that should not happen, no matter what the budgetary constraints of the school are. Then, she states that she must consider the advantages of her child being in this smaller school, and she begins to address how this issue simply puts more responsibility on her (as a parent) to help her child get through. This transferring of responsibility onto the parent is a reflection of the earlier discussion of responsibility in this paper. She then seemingly changes her mind and states that the fact that her child is not receiving the help that he needs is not “purposely done,” rather it is the result of budget problems, and she does not know what the school officials could do to better the situation. The parent worked her way towards justifying the serious neglecting of responsibility by school officials.

Other parents also expressed such a willingness to pardon the mistakes they see in the school. A few parents, despite the fact that their children had been students in the school for at least five months, said that they couldn't answer particular questions during the interviews because they had not been involved in the school for long enough. One mother, when asked if she saw anything about the school that could be improved, said, “Not right now because this is our first year here” (A1 p. 6). Another parent, when asked if the school was preparing her child for his future goals, said, “It's, I, right now it might be too early to answer cause this is his first year there and I'm hoping by next year he wants to go there next year, if not, he might want to go someplace else, um...that's kind

of hard to answer because he's still new there..." (A2 p. 13). Another parent, when asked the same question, said:

I think so, they're, right now, I couldn't tell you because we didn't look anything right now, until next year, so until next year will tell you like, 'ok, they helping him or they don't help'...But with like anything about college, I couldn't tell you right now because we didn't apply yet, until next year so I'll know for him (B2 p. 7-8).

One parent used the lack of time that she sees in teachers' schedules as a reason to justify, in part, their failures to communicate with her. She said that teachers don't call and let her know if her child is following the rules: "Um, so I think, um...I've never been a teacher, so I can't really say that they have the time to call, um...but there are some things I wish they would call me on, um, but I've never spoken to another parent about it, so" (C2 p. 4). Later, she said that her daughter can't get the extra help she needs in her classes when she is struggling. She said, "So I guess um, I don't know if the teachers just don't have time, it's a little bit more help with the kids, um, but she was struggling for a long time, and of course I have to come up" (C2 p. 6). This parent was not happy with the school and she expressed that in many ways – she was worried about a lack of extra help available to her daughter, she was angry that she did not hear from school officials when issues came up with her daughter, and she was not pleased that she often had to go to the school to find out what was going on with her child. She was not willing to fully pardon or excuse the failures of teachers, but she was willing to consider the reasons for them and to sometimes justify them.

One parent in particular seemed reluctant to carry through her criticisms of the school. She observed a particularly upsetting event in a classroom and she was very

concerned about the effect that the disorder in this class had on her child's learning. But then she said, "But um, I don't know, I just, I just haven't had, um, any negative experiences, um, with [the school]" (D2 p. 6). She then spoke about a very recent problem she had – no one from the school contacted her to tell her about an important meeting about her child:

I mean, I wasn't going to get furious about it, um, no major decisions, you know, were made, um, someone called me afterwards...Um, but, you know, those are the only issues I have and I'm pretty sure that, um, a side of that is they're probably dealing with, um...they're probably used to, um, making some major decisions without parents. You know, I know this, there's a lack of parent involvement, but this is a parent that is involved, so, you know, I don't want that assumption, um, to be made, even if I don't understand certain things, I'm still, I'm still involved and try to understand to the best of my ability (D2 p. 6).

She spoke more about a particular teacher that did not teach her child well:

I just, I felt like [laughing] it was just a waste of time – I think he just wasted a year in [this] class, and I don't think that there's nothing that they can do about it. You know, I coulda, I could probably bitch and complain about it, but, um, I don't think that she's coming back next year, um...he's wasted a year in [this] class, with that, but I haven't had, um, any issues (D2 p. 8).

This parent would begin to address a serious problem with the school or with a particular class but then quickly say that she didn't have any negative experiences or issues with the school.

One parent, when asked what advice she would give to other parents, said:

So...I just can say, you know, just, just try, and I guess in due time, I guess they'll look at things, situations, what's going on in the schools, you know, kids dropping out, girls having babies and this and that, you know, I don't know. There's something that has to be, has to be done (D1 p. 13).

Her concern was clear, but the person(s) on whom she was laying blame and responsibility was unclear. Another parent made a related point – when talking about the

biggest problems in the school and the district, she mentioned violence and how a lack of employment opportunities for students in the summer can lead to more violence. She then said, “that’s really tough because it’s like...it’s not the Boston Public Schools’ fault, it’s not the city’s fault, it’s not the parent, I mean, it’s, it’s like a group of people, you know” (A2 p. 9). These parents know that they need to place blame and responsibility, but it is as if they sometimes do not know where to place it, or perhaps they are afraid to do so.

A Change of Heart

Some parents had a change of heart after their interviews. I heard of these changes in opinion during Family Council meetings and during my other interactions with parents when I was at the school. Although my field notes were very weak and not a main source of data for my work, I did use them to look at these instances of parents’ opinions changing drastically.

One parent, for example, was content with the ability of teachers to responsibly keep her informed at the time of her interview, but she has since changed her opinions and is unhappy with the level of communication from the teachers. Her interview took place during the 2007-2008 school year and as of December 2008, she does not feel that teachers are doing enough to reach out to her and to stay in communication with her about her child’s progress. During a recent conversation, she told me that this year she has had no phone calls from teachers. She said that if she doesn’t hear anything, she assumes everything is going well, and then she receives a bad progress report; she is being informed too late. She and another parent said that teachers called them during the

last school year. But by December of this school year, they did not even know who their children's teachers were.

These parents and others were changing their perspectives on the school. The positive aspects of the school that they had seen the previous year were no longer enough because they did not feel that their requests regarding their children's educations were being honored. Another parent, months after her interview, expressed concern over the fact that most of her child's grades are not posted on the school's online system. She said that during the last term, she also received no progress reports and she was "very upset." She added, "I think there's been a lack of communication." She is not being kept informed of what is going on and she is beginning to place more of an emphasis on the failings of teachers.

To summarize, many parents believe that their responsibilities include being a constant presence in the schools, "creating" responsibility in the teachers, and listening to both sides in a conflict between their children and teachers. Parents often blame themselves and other parents for not being able to live up to such responsibilities. This blame evolves into some parents serving as "enforcers" in the school system who argue that other parents should live up to certain expectations. Parents often are reluctant to criticize anyone other than themselves and other parents. Many parents understand the responsibilities of teachers to be contingent upon the responsibilities of parents – they seem to believe that in order for teachers to be fully responsible to a child, that child's parent must prove that she is invested in the child's education. Parents believe that teachers have specific responsibilities and duties, including to help and motivate the

students and to talk to the parents and keep them informed. However, parents tend to “pardon” teachers for not getting vital work done and for not accomplishing certain goals within the school and with students. But parents do not seem willing to pardon themselves or other parents from living up to the parenting norms of dominant society.

Discussion of the Theme of Responsibility

Parents whose children attend disadvantaged schools often are neglected because they cannot live up to the “ideal” parent model that is based on middle-class, dominant societal norms (Griffith and Smith 2005). The paradigm of the “ideal” parent works to maintain the blame that falls on poor and working-class parents. The parents do not deserve to work under feelings of guilt and anxiety, but all parents of children in inner-city schools struggle underneath constructions of inadequacy and underneath comparisons to middle-class ideals. Griffith and Smith, in *Mothering for Schooling*, found “a strongly moral dimension governing the relationship of mothers to the school, capable of generating an almost theological sense of guilt and anxiety” (2005: 33). This moral discourse – this insistence that what parents do is never enough – produces such guilt and anxiety that it can cause parents to place large amounts of the burden on their own shoulders, as I found in my interviews. But by validating the experiences of inner-city parents, this research can help create the recognition that all parents deserve to be respected and listened to in their children’s schools.

My data has shown that these parents hold themselves to high expectations and those expectations are based on the norms of dominant society. These expectations relate to their physical presence in the schools, the work they do to convince teachers to be

responsible, and the work they require of themselves to mediate conflicts between teachers and their children. Lareau's findings support these parents' assertion that they have to be present to convince teachers to care:

Some of the special attention that children received in school resulted from teachers' determination of their students' special needs; but some was due to parents' presence at school. When teachers believed that parents valued education and were heavily involved in children's schooling, they took actions which they did not take for children whose parents were less active in schooling (2000: 140).

I found that parents often hold other parents to the same expectations and argue that those other parents need to be more involved in order for some of the school's problems to be fixed. These issues of responsibility and blame, expectations and excuses, are very intricate in the minds of parents. Luttrell writes, "Part of the day-to-day dynamics of class transmission through education is that individual mothers are blamed, and they in turn blame themselves for the institutional failure of schools to educate disadvantaged children" (1997: 112).

Class and privilege are intricately involved in the ways that parents interact with their children's schools. Annette Lareau writes about the different child-rearing practices that arise in families of different social classes. While I don't believe that Lareau intends to malign the strategies of working-class and poor parents, her approach does construct those parents' practices as deficient. Such a construction is negligent in that it fails to address how those parents describe their own parenting practices and the strategies that they use to overcome many obstacles. Lareau has nothing truly positive to say about the parenting of the working class and the poor and she does not allow for parents to defend their practices.

One of the reasons that I chose to conduct this research is that I believe that we do need to allow working-class and poor parents to speak for themselves about the benefits of their child-rearing practices; we also need to acknowledge that not all working-class and poor parents adopt Lareau's severely deficit-based model. And again, this deficit model is exaggerated and generalized. The voices of parents are the most important in combating the idea that they come from a deficit position. Within the deficit model, Lareau argues that poor and working-class parents experience more distance from the school and from teachers due to being intimidated – she argues that these parents have feelings of mistrust and powerlessness (2003: 243). But Lareau did not look at *why* this occurs – why do the parents reach this level of distrust and why do they experience the school in a powerless way? Vincent writes, of this issue of class and access to knowledge among parents:

Cutting across these practical factors is another order of constraint – professional boundary setting, parents' sense of powerlessness, a deference to professional knowledge and expertise, and a privileging of individual strategies over the possibilities of collective action (2000: 133).

So there are structural factors that prevent working-class and poor parents from feeling powerful and knowledgeable in their interactions with schools and we must allow those parents to speak to why this happens. Again, this is where my research enters the field.

As things stand now, parents in oppressed communities seem to place most of the responsibility for their children's education on themselves and not on their children's teachers. These parents enforce on themselves the dominant cultural norm that bad parenting leads to an unimportant, or disposable, child. Many parents told me that parents must be communicative and available advocates in order to ensure a complete

education for their children. They are fighting the construction of themselves as deficient parents and they feel a strong need to show teachers that they are “good” parents. If they do not, then, the institution of the school and its staff are free to assume that their children are unworthy of the full attention of educators:

[A] key feature of the hegemonic or ‘official’ discourse of ‘good’ parenting is that of individual responsibility, borne primarily by mothers, residing within self-reliant and self-sufficient family units. ‘Good’ mothers accept responsibility for all facets of their children’s development and work to produce children who will become reasoning and reasonable citizens (Vincent 2000: 36).

One would hope that the issues of all children would be addressed in public schools in this country, no matter what the parents of those children were capable of doing. But according to the parents in this research, they cannot hope for full and equal treatment of their children. Instead, they must constantly fight for their children to be noticed.

It is possible that there is great anger among the parents about the fact that their children are not truly safe, or advocated for, in school, but they did not feel safe or comfortable addressing this anger with me. And I must accept that. There were many instances during interviews when parents chose not to finish a critique of the school. Part of the reason for this tendency of parents may be that they do not want this criticism to reflect back on them. They want to be seen as fully involved and supportive parents and critiquing the school or officials could be interpreted as an attempt to deflect some of their own responsibilities. Walker and MacLure, in *Activating Participation*, write about parent-teacher meetings:

Teachers-as-experts were threatened by encounters with adults who could claim to know the children better than they, and who might hold their teaching to account. Parents likewise had their claims to know their children

contested, with the status of parent being undermined by the client role constructed during the event (2005: 103).

And Reay writes in *Activating Participation*, “the working-class mothers were much more hesitant and apologetic and far more likely to disqualify and, at times, contradict themselves when talking to teachers” (2005: 29). In order to avoid being seen as “irresponsible,” “uninvolved,” or antagonistic to the school, then, parents are willing to excuse the irresponsibility of others. I cannot say if this is truly the motivation behind the tendency of parents to justify the failings of school officials, and they probably had many different motivations behind such statements, but this is one idea. Societal discourse has convinced them that “shiftless” parents would blame the school but responsible parents would blame the self.

People can place responsibility and blame on themselves, on others, and/or on structures. Parents may have a hard time taking the step towards blaming the structure of the education system because they do not always have the language that would be required to place such blame. As a result, perhaps it is easier for them to place responsibility and blame on themselves and on others like them – other parents and adults raising children in their community. They become *enforcers* of dominant parenting norms – norms that come from the mainstream of society (Griffith and Smith 2005). They are enforcing compliance with these mainstream norms, but living up to these norms usually requires resources that these parents, and others like them, may not have. The burdens may be inappropriate, but parents feel as though they need to live up to them, and they therefore enforce them on themselves and on others.

It is possible that some of these ideas that parents conveyed to me – about enforcing certain expectations on themselves and others – were conveyed to me because of my identity and the way that parents viewed me. As I discussed in my methods section, I worked at the school and was a normal presence there; this fact worked to my advantage, in some ways, but it also made me a somewhat unclear entity to the parents because they could not be sure exactly how much authority I had in the school and with whom I would share their ideas. While I did tell parents, of course, that their confidentiality would be protected, it is possible that some of them did not believe me. And they may have felt that they had to live up to a certain parenting image in my eyes – the eyes of a white woman who they likely assumed to be middle class. Unfortunately, then, and the fault for this lies with me, some of the parents may have felt that they needed to tell me what they assumed I wanted to hear about their parenting practices and expectations. What they told me, then, would fit in with middle-class norms for parenting; they were enforcing certain behaviors on themselves and others through their words to me.

But resistance against these norms would be acceptable. American educational institutions have proven to be incapable of working for oppressed communities and thus resistance against such institutions is logical and rational for working-class and poor children and their parents. Therefore, they must be allowed to speak out (in their own voices) against this system. The work of theorists like Lareau continues to reinforce the idea that certain parents are severely lacking in their relationships with the schools and

other mainstream institutions. These theories need to be contested and I think that the parents in this work can do that.

How Parents Understand Their Communication with the School

Communication is a crucial topic for parents. They are willing to work to help ensure a quality education for their children, but most see their efforts as severely curtailed if they do not receive information from school officials and if those officials do not communicate with them often. In this section, I will discuss what parents understand to be the strengths of the school's communication practices and what it means to parents when they feel that they are not being kept informed and that their requests to the school are not being fulfilled. While some of the information in this section is a continuation of what I discussed in the prior section on responsibility, I feel that this topic is important enough to continue on its own. Communication is one of the most important activities for human beings and its denial by one person in a relationship can severely limit the feelings of power and agency in the other person. So every effort that teachers and school officials make to communicate with parents, or every time that they do not make such an effort, has serious consequences for parents and for their children. This section will address how parents understand those efforts and consequences.

Strengths of School Communication

Parents expressed appreciation for some of the school's efforts to communicate with them. Parents said that they appreciate receiving phone calls from teachers about their children, being able to look at the children's grades online, receiving progress

reports, and hearing back from teachers when they leave messages. One parent said, when asked to describe how she sees the school:

I like it, and I have to say it again because it's small, um, and there's, there's a lot of communication, more communication going on than at a, a, um, a larger school...I felt like I, I'm being heard when I walk through the door, you know, but, I really can't describe it all into one word, um, but it does provide some comfort (D2 p. 2).

Parents had other positive things to say about the school and the teachers keeping in touch with them. Nonetheless, they do have some criticisms of the school's communication tendencies. They were also critical of the fact that if they were not on the Family Council, they probably would not be as informed as they are. One parent told me about a specific and serious safety issue at the school that she would never have known about if she didn't go to the Family Council meetings, for example. I will now address some of the other ways in which parents were concerned about their level of communication with school officials.

Feeling Uninformed; Feeling Your Requests Are Not Fulfilled

Parents expressed justifiable frustration about feeling uninformed. Some spoke about several instances in which they felt that school officials and teachers had not done enough to keep them informed about their children's progress and about events that occurred in the school. They also expressed frustration over instances in which their requests were not followed.

One mother did have a lot of praise for the ability and the willingness of teachers to communicate with her about her child's progress on a regular basis. She told me that she is regularly in touch with her child's teachers to see how things are going in his

classes. When I asked her if there was anything teachers could do better to reach out to parents, she said:

Um, I don't know if they call, like, every parents, but I know they call me any time there's anything wrong or if a kid's like missing homework, or, if my [child] misses homework or my [child] doesn't do what he's supposed to do, they call me. And also, if they don't call me, we agree to call each other...I don't know with other parents how they do, because I know there's a lot of parents they don't like for teachers to call home, so I don't know how they communicate with the other parents. But with me, we feel like we have a good connection and, uh, we try to work together for the future for the kid (B2 p. 3).

This parent does subscribe to the belief that parents have to show their concern and advocate for their children in order to ensure the efforts of teachers, but she still expressed this confidence in the communication process between her and teachers.

Other parents, however, expressed that they do *not* feel informed and they do not feel that their requests to teachers are fulfilled. One parent, when I asked if she thought that teachers were receptive to her advice that she offered to them, said:

I really, I don't know. Because there's like, when they're visit, in the way they do their meetings with the people, they do like open house, so there's like twenty kids, and then I mean there might be twenty parents, so they really don't, I don't think, grasp everything we tell them, you know. I mean, they get your cell phone number in case they have to call you, stuff like that, but I don't, I mean, I don't know, I just can't answer that, like saying, "ok, I've seen an improvement because I mentioned that." You know, I can't answer that, but... (A2 p. 7).

This parent was reluctant to sustain any kind of critique of teachers, but she did begin to address the fact that teachers sometimes do not (or cannot) respect the requests of parents due to communication problems, including the fact that they may have too many parents making requests at the same time at events like the open house. Another parent, when speaking about her experiences meeting and talking with teachers, said:

Yeah, yeah, cause one of the things every new school that my kids go to, I talk to the teacher and I tell them, ‘This is where I’m coming from. If you see any slippage, any of the, call me – I’m always available, I’ll drop whatever I have, cause that’s important to me.’ And, but somebody that doesn’t tell me, then I get upset (B1 p. 7).

This parent does what she thinks she must by approaching the teachers first and telling them that she wants to be informed; she requests for them to communicate with her if they see any changes in her child’s behavior or class performance. So, as she says, she gets upset when this specific and personal request is not fulfilled:

So I have the understanding and um, there was a couple times things did slip by that she wasn’t, she didn’t do one or two things that, or whatever, you know, and, I feel as though the school should have been, you know, where I put that directive out there, they should have called and said, you know, ‘She’s missing something.’ Not that they have to hold her hand or anything, but at least I can be the back-up at home. You know, and I think this is what happens with a lot of the kids – there’s no follow-through, no follow-up, and then the kids falter (B1 p. 7).

She says that having this request to teachers fulfilled would allow her to be the “back-up at home” – she wishes to remain informed so that she can continue the job of educating her child. And according to this parent, when these requests to be informed from parents are not followed by teachers, that can have serious consequences for the progress of the students. This parent later explained that due to communication issues, “half of the time they [some parents] don’t get the information that they need to get” (B1 p. 8). She is aware that the lines of communication are failing some parents, due to many issues, and she sees this as a serious problem in schools today.

Another parent expressed her struggles with getting enough information from teachers; she often feels that they are not honoring her requests. She said that when her child had a portfolio review, which is a big event to which parents are supposed to be

invited, she only received half of the information from the teachers. She also mentioned that teachers do not always seem prepared to send her the information that she requests:

That's like when he, certain things he'll bring home, like, they're teaching kids math totally different, and um, and um, my background is [math-related], so um, I'll say, 'you need to get examples from your teacher – more examples.' Um...there's not enough information, you know what I'm saying? I don't, I, to me, I, and I'll send him back and say, 'you need to ask for this, this, this, and this.' Do I always get that? No, you know (C1 p. 3).

When I asked what she thought the teachers could do better, she mentioned that often their “hands are tied” and that they do need support. Nonetheless, she continued to put forward the view that parents are not being informed enough about their children's progress, whether it be behavioral progress or progress on completing their portfolios.

One parent was particularly concerned about feeling uninformed. First, she mentioned that her child had a problem with another student and a teacher told her not to worry about it, which was understandably upsetting to her: “So I think it's, it's, when I talk to the teachers and what [my child's] problem is – they seem to be aware of it, and it's like, nobody never calls me, you know. But um, I have to approach – I never get phone calls, um, I think that's the only thing [laughing], um...” (C2 p. 3). When asked if she wished to receive more phone calls, she continued:

I wish somebody would have told me [about the conflict], because I had to come up to the school. It's like, 'oh no, we're aware of it, blah blah blah.' Well, nobody called me, um, but they were aware of it, but um, so that's, they're aware of it but they don't always notify me, which, maybe they don't have the time, I don't know, um, but that's about the only thing (C2 p. 3-4).

This issue was related to her child's safety – she was not being informed about a situation of conflict that could have resulted in harm to her child. Despite the fact that she began to downplay the irresponsibility of teachers and school officials at the end of this story,

she continued, throughout the interview, to address ways in which the school caused her to feel uninformed and as though her requests were not being considered. Her perceptions of the school have thus changed since her child started attending:

...cause when we came to the open house, they were very forward, you know, talked about this program, that program, and that they have advisors and advisors will contact you if you need this or that, but that hasn't really happened...it was frustrating at the beginning but things seem to be getting better (C2 p. 5).

Some communication issues have been improving for her. However, she is concerned that progress reports are:

the only communication we get from teachers...We get that every three months, um, and that's the only time we really know what's going on, like, so you have to call and make an appointment and find out, well ok, why is [my child] getting F's? You know, how come before three months ago I wasn't warned, or [my child] wasn't warned, that [my child's] failing? Um, so maybe more progress reports? Maybe once a month? I know that's a lot of work, but um...they come every blue moon, so maybe more, that can be structured a little bit better...So maybe more of those, see what's going on in class, stuff like that (C2 p. 8).

In order to help her child progress through high school, this parent feels that she needs to receive updates on her child's grades more often than once every few months. She acknowledges that this may be a lot of work for teachers, but she also alludes to the fact that because teachers do not do many progress reports, she then feels that she has to do more work herself by calling the school and making an appointment and finding out why her child is not doing well in her classes.

And when she did come up to the school to speak to a teacher that her child was struggling with, she had a hard time communicating with him: "some teachers are pretty ok. But you have to kind of like make your point. He wasn't like hearing me, kind of"

(C2 p. 8). Some issues that make parents wish for more communication and more consideration from teachers go beyond grades and coursework – they fall under the issue of safety, the most important topic for many parents. This particular parent said that she had not heard any news about safety from school officials but that her child told her about children being arrested near the school and about the lack of safety at the T station closest to the school: “I think safety’s a, something they should think about, cause there’s a lot of problems at [the station], from what my [child’s] told me, um, but it’s never been mentioned....nothing from [the school]” (C2 p. 14).

Another parent told a story about when one of her children was in school at a different location. The school had her child taken to the hospital for serious asthma problems. The teachers claimed that the parent was not returning their phone calls previously about this growing issue, but the parent said that one of the teachers had called her regularly prior to this incident and had never mentioned any health concerns about the child. Whatever happened that prevented this parent from receiving the information that she needed from teachers had serious consequences for her child. The lack of avenues of communication between parents and teachers – that cause parents to feel uninformed – do not just relate to grades and homework. At base, they can affect the safety and well-being of the children.

To summarize, in this section I have discussed both the positives of the school’s communication system, according to parents, and the ways in which the school causes parents to feel uninformed and as though school officials do not respect their requests. Every effort that teachers and school officials make to communicate with parents, and

every time they fail to make such an effort, has serious consequences for parents and their children. The efforts (or lack thereof) that school officials make to communicate affect and frame the perceptions that parents have of their children's school.

Discussion of the Theme of Communication

It is important to mention that the parents in this research were all somehow involved with the Family Council at the school. And several of them did mention that being involved in that group was how they received a lot of their information about the school and how they found out about many events and opportunities at the school. So the discussion of this issue, like all parts of this paper, is affected by the population that I was able to interview and it is possible that my findings would be very different if I were to ask a different group of parents. But as I have written previously, I chose to interview those parents who volunteered because I need to recognize and respect that most parents would not have the time to devote to an interview.

Generally, the parents often feel as though the school does not honor them because it does not treat them as equitable partners in communication. By not contacting parents, school officials are demonstrating a lack of respect. They either are assuming that parents do not want to be informed, a common and dangerous misperception of urban parents, or they are simply demonstrating that they believe that parents are not and cannot be important partners in their children's education. Lareau, in *Home Advantage*, also found that working-class parents often were not aware of or informed about special programs or resources available for their children (2000: 134).

One parent said that she fears that teachers are going to make assumptions about her – based on what they supposedly see in other parents – and then not contact her when there are important decisions to be made about her child. When a teacher does not communicate with a parent, or when a teacher gives up on communicating with a parent after making only one attempt, that teacher is assuming that that parent is uninterested, uninvolved, or deficient. The simple act of not picking up the phone, then, is an act of disrespect.

Crozier, in *Activating Participation*, said that the parents with whom he worked “reported that in spite of their concern, interest, and general involvement, they were not kept informed by the schools...Other parents said that they asked for information but weren’t given it” (2005: 52). Parents told many stories about making requests to teachers and not having them fulfilled, such as a request for more examples to be sent home with the math assignment. They also told stories about finding out much too late that their children were having serious issues at school, including issues of being threatened by other students. These failures to communicate, or choices on the part of teachers to not communicate, trivialize the impact of such silence on both the child and the parent. And in the case of one example – the parent who found out very late that her child was being threatened by another student – the parent ended up having to go to the school to find out what was going on and to try to arrive at some solutions with school officials.

This paper already mentioned that some parents feel that they must have a physical presence in the school in order to guarantee a good education for their children. And particularly if no one is communicating with them, the only way to force

communication is to walk through the door of the school and demand an audience. In some cases, such an action on the part of a parent would be considered hostile or aggressive, and the parent would have to then deal with the repercussions of her action. The consequences would be particularly complicated if that parent were a person of color or poor, because those parents are in constant danger of being deemed dangerous and therefore incapable of raising their children (Roberts 2000-2001: 1620). Another parent said that she came to school to talk to a teacher who her child was struggling with and he didn't seem to hear her. We can imagine the level of frustration that this would cause – a parent came to school to both defend her child and to find out what was really going on and the teacher didn't seem to hear her words or her opinions. What more could she do?

One parent gave a severe example of a lack of communication when she said that school officials ended up calling in emergency medical care for her child and later claimed that the mother had not responded to their phone calls about this issue. The parent did not recall having received any calls or messages. But more importantly, the dynamics of the school and the poor decisions of the teachers that allowed this lack of communication to continue to the point of requiring emergency medical attention for a child must not be allowed to recur. This parent's child could have been taken away from her for this lack of communication (Roberts 2000-2001: 1620). Parents must always, at all schools, feel informed. Teachers must prioritize the requests of parents and they must be sure to demonstrate to those parents that they are valuable stakeholders in the school who deserve to have all the necessary information so that they can make decisions about their children's futures. It is crucial that school officials hear and honor parents' words,

recommendations, and requests. Only then will the education of children be complete and respectful of their families and communities.

How Parents Understand Institutional Issues and Agency: The MCAS and Safety

In this section, I will discuss how parents experience the MCAS (the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) and the ways in which they critique it. Many parents were very critical of the MCAS, but they also at times expressed a lack of control, or a belief that they did not have the agency to be able to do anything to change the MCAS. I also unexpectedly noticed some similarities between how parents addressed the MCAS and how they addressed the safety of the school. As a result, in this section, I will discuss both how parents experience the MCAS and how they experience and respond to issues of safety at the school; I will address how these issues intertwine in the experiences of parents. I also will relate both of these topics to issues of agency – both how the parents express it, by critiquing the MCAS and the safety of the school, and how they often do not feel that they have agency or control over these two issues.

The MCAS

I included a question about the MCAS in my original interview protocol but I did not think that the question would allow the parents to talk about how they truly feel about the school. My perception of the topic quickly changed. Asking one question about the MCAS sparked some emotional and strong responses from parents and some of them brought up the MCAS without any prompting. In the focus group, as well, after parents wrote on the posters, I asked what topic they wanted to start with and one mother said,

“MCAS. I can’t stand the MCAS.” I will address some of the themes that emerged in the interviews and focus group here.

Many parents do not see how the MCAS is connected to school. Some said that it is not testing what their children learn in school and it therefore is not an important and/or fair part of their children’s education. One mother in the focus group addressed this lack of relevance that she sees in the MCAS:

I think it just puts such a bad statistic on the kids as far as their level, you know, their thought process, their whole academics. Um, my daughter didn’t do well on any of the MCAS at all...but she’s been on the honor roll since kindergarten. So I mean, it just, it makes them feel like they’re not smart, and I just think it’s so...that’s such a little test to make such a...you know, big deal.

Some parents feel that the material on the test is often irrelevant and it causes teachers to have to (or to choose to) “teach to the test” in order to get results. This phenomenon of focusing on one test and using that test to determine what is taught in school is troubling to some of the parents; some also told me that they worry that their children are at a disadvantage on the test because they are often not familiar with the social and cultural references in the MCAS. Many parents expressed the belief that the students are simply not being taught the material that they need to know in order to do well on the test and in college. So to begin, I will address the MCAS and the concerns about its content, its connection to classes that the students take, how it is emphasized in the schools, and its relevance to their lives and communities.

One parent said:

I don’t, I...really don’t understand what it’s, the MCAS, because, what they tell me, what I hear from my older son, it really don’t have too much to do with the school...Cause, um, my son, my older son, he was telling me like,

they say something about, you know, like a guest rooms and bedrooms, and some...and he, he was saying that some kids wouldn't know this because most kids don't have an extra bedroom in their house (A1 p. 7).

I mentioned this example to another parent when she and I were discussing the MCAS.

(I acknowledge that my choice of words influenced, in part, how this parent responded and that is why I have included my own words in the quote that follows). When I told her about this particular example of how the test can be culturally or socially irrelevant to students, we dialogued:

Parent: Who would know about a guest bedroom?

Emily: Yeah...yeah, it's scary.

Parent: How many kids would know about a guest bedroom?

Emily: Yeah, it just makes you wonder...

Parent: They're lucky to have their own bedroom [laughing].

Emily: Yeah.

Parent: That they probably share with four other kids [laughing]. What's a guest bedroom? You know? It's, it's scary. It really is (C1 p. 17).

This parent also linked her feelings about the MCAS to the mathematical material that it covers:

...and a lot of the parents that I've talked to, uh...it's a mix from incomes, and they all feel the same way. They even, we talk about the math that they're teaching these kids – scaling a building. How many kids are going to become an architect? And that's on their MCAS – it makes no, it makes no sense. What happened to the basic math? (C1 p. 17).

These parents are not only critical of the cultural insensitivities of the test – some of them also see connections between the general curriculum at the school and what is being tested and they believe that both the curriculum and the test need to be examined for relevance and fairness. They are critical about whether or not what their children are learning and what they are being tested on will truly help them to accomplish their goals. Another parent said of the MCAS, “It's a waste of time” (C2 p. 2). She explained:

Well, cause they spend more time learning to take a test than learning, than learning. And, um, she found it very boring, um, well, maybe in math, science was pretty new. Um...she just thought it was a waste of time because, I guess she knew it and, like, what was the point of taking it – like the preparation, they spend like half a year preparing for the test, which I personally think is a waste of time, um, instead of just teaching them. I didn't have to take the MCAS when I was in, went to school, so um, I can see it being just a waste of time. I think the kids would learn more better than teaching and then taking a test. I know taking a test is very important when they get older, because the SATs and all that stuff, so I understand them learning how to take a test is important, but I would not think it is in elementary school or ninth grade. I think they need to learn it first and then maybe prep for it, but spending half a year to take a test is a, I don't know. I don't agree with it, but there's nothing I can do about it [laughs] (C2 p. 2).

So parents are not just concerned about the relevance of the test to their children's lives – they also worry that their children's learning time is being wasted by the MCAS. They worry that their children are learning to take a test instead of simply learning. Another parent said:

It creates, it creates this mentality where the student body, as well as the teaching, um, the teaching staff and the school administration even, become overly focused on, on, teaching to the test, and I've seen that, um. And I think, I think that creates a situation where education for the sake of education and learning is not there, because it's education to pass the test. And I don't think that's what education is about, personally (E1 p. 10).

A parent in the focus group added, "It's teaching them that you have to teach for the test, and I think that becomes problematic and that's why, you know, kids are turned off to schools, because it's all about, like, passing this MCAS...and the fun of learning is sort of gone from it." One can understand the frustration that a parent would feel if she did not think that her children were learning important material.

Another parent saw this issue in a slightly different fashion. When I asked her if she thought the school was preparing her child for college, she went back to the topic of the MCAS:

Um, they're just upgrading science because when she graduates she's gonna have to do MCAS in science – they're adding science, you know, to the MCAS. And Massachusetts did very poorly last year on science. Uh, so I don't think, I don't see enough science, so those are my two things, uh, language and science, that they upgrade that, and I will talk on it until, you know, the follow-up and see what's going on in those two fields, cause that's very important, cause otherwise they won't get to college. They won't have the, you know, the academics to get into college (B1 p. 15-16).

Instead of worrying that the material on the science MCAS is irrelevant, this parent is instead worried that the classes her child takes are not going to prepare her for that test or for college classes in the future. She therefore wishes for the school to upgrade its science (and language) classes in order to ensure that her child is prepared for the test and for life after high school.

But the branches of thought of all of the parents quoted here are not unrelated – some parents are concerned that the classes and test material are not helpful to their children while some are concerned that the class material is not preparing students to be successful on the tests or in college. But in both cases, the parents are expressing concern over the space that lies between the tests and the content that their children actually need. If they need basic math, as one parent argues, but are not learning that math, they will not succeed on the test or in the years beyond high school. And if they need to be able to pass the MCAS in science, but are not taking the right “upgraded” science classes, they will not succeed on the test or in the years beyond high school. So both branches of thought are demonstrating that parents see the administration of these tests as an injustice

being committed against their children – they are not being prepared in the right way with the right curriculum that will help them to be prosperous after high school.

Going beyond content, many parents discussed the MCAS as a burden that is laid on children who may not test well. One parent said that her child is a good tester, “But, the kids that it’s difficult for, you know, are slow learners or whatever, I just feel as though it’s a burden on them and, there has to be another tool, you know, that you can measure these kids and not affect their uh high school diploma” (B1 p. 6). Another parent said, “They’re not even addressing the fact that people can’t even take this test” (D2 p. 11). Some brought up their personal struggles with testing to address the fact that the MCAS can be a real burden on children who are not skilled test takers; they used these points to argue against the imposition of a standardized test as a graduation requirement:

So, um, um, I think they have to take a second look at that, you know, and that’s why I have some concerns about the MCAS. Even though the child’s bright, if he doesn’t pass the MCAS, he doesn’t get his graduate, he doesn’t get his diploma, and I don’t think that’s fair (B1 p. 5).

Another parent added:

I don’t, I don’t think a kid should just be determined on the test, whether they graduate from high school. I, I really don’t, you know. Cause I can talk, speak for me, I was never a great tester...never...ok, but I can do my work...ok, and that’s our own inner being that makes us, some, some kids can either not do their work very well but test very well, you see what I’m saying? And some kids can be very bright, very, extremely bright, but the testing alone can bring such fear that they, it becomes a mental block (C1 p. 17).

When we read these parents words, we must consider what they desire for their children above many other things – safety from harm. Because the parents often do not see the

high school as a safe place, which will be addressed shortly, wanting their children to graduate is the same as wanting their children to reach a safe place.

The most meaningful expression of this resistance against the idea that these tests should determine the “wholeness” or “completeness” of an individual came from one parent:

I think it, it just doesn't make any sense, I don't think this one test should determine whether these kids should pass to the next grade or whatever, I mean, come on, I mean, it's just like, you know, having some kids and being married, and whatever, doesn't determine you as a complete woman, you know, a complete individual, or whatever (D2 p. 12).

Here, this parent is resisting the requirement that students have to pass the MCAS in order to graduate and she eloquently links the overemphasis placed on this test to the overemphasis that society places on marriage and childbearing for women. Presumably, these are societal requirements that she (along with all women) has been fighting against during her lifetime and she now feels the need to fight against requirements that are being placed on her child that may prevent him from moving on or from finding success after high school.

Other parents took these criticisms of the MCAS and went further – they suggested that their children are being set up to fail. One parent said:

But I, I don't know, I just [laughing slightly], I can't even put it into words, I just don't, I just, doesn't think it makes any sense and I don't even know how well [my child's] gonna do on it. Smart kid but how is he going to do with testing? You know, and now this is gonna determine, you know, where he is and who he should, where he should be and whatever. It doesn't make any sense, and I think it's just such a set-up for failure, mmhmm (D2 p. 12).

Another parent brought up the same critique – that her child is being set up to fail:

I think it's the worst thing that they could have ever introduced to the system. Because you've already...set a kid up to fail...cause that's their biggest fear and that's all they think about. So you either have them drop out of school, cause they don't want to take it...ok. Or their fear overrides everything else. So they take it, but the fear and the expectations...is strong. You can have the smartest kid, the smartest kid, and their fear will override their brightness...am I right? (C1 p. 16).

And a parent in the focus group said, "I feel like those standardized ones...and the MCAS being new, I don't know, I feel like it's some kind of a set up, like, for people to fail, kind of, because um, it's really hard, it's something new, um, and if kids don't pass it, they can't graduate, and that's not, that's not fair." Despite their willingness to verbally attack the testing system, however, I found that many parents would still resolve their thoughts on the MCAS with statements that showed that they do not think they have any agency or control over it. I will address this sense of a lack of agency or a lack of control shortly.

But first, I wanted to continue the theme of fear that this last parent mentioned. She spoke of fear several times in relation to the MCAS. After the statement that she made above, I asked her what her child says about the MCAS and she responded, "He's scared, you know" (C1 p. 17). She was not the only one to use a language of fear – another parent stressed that fear is an integral part of the testing system, to the detriment of the children:

Um, on MCAS, it's like, I feel like that's something they [inaudible] doing, because they need the kids to be afraid. All the kids, because sometimes, even a kid been doing good, but you go to school next day and you know you're going to take this, then you feel like, "oh my God, if I don't pass." It's just to put, like, this on your spirit, "oh my God, what's going to happen," probably can make you fail. Uh, it's not we can change it because it's been assigned for majority, but I don't think it's a good idea with MCAS because it make kids more afraid, which my son is already passed the MCAS test, but

I remember the day before he took, he couldn't sleep that night because was thinking like "tomorrow's the MCAS, tomorrow's the MCAS." And that is going to make a kid like more concerned – to be afraid, you can make a lot of mistakes (B2 p. 6).

Her son couldn't sleep the night before the MCAS, because he was afraid of what was going to happen, and that may have affected his performance on the test. Many experts and parents themselves suggest that one of the main responsibilities of parents is to make sure their children are ready for school each day by feeding them well and making sure they get enough sleep. So if this parent's child was falling asleep in class and during the test that day, it is quite possible that the teachers or the administrators of the test would blame the parent for his sleepiness and poor performance. But this child's lack of sleep was not something that the parent had control over – he was simply terrified of the test that the state was requiring him to take that day. This connection that I am drawing between (parental) responsibility and fear is important – as I discussed in the first section of this paper, parents are seen (by themselves and by others) as the primary holders of responsibility in their children's educational lives. And yet they are expected to be responsible for things over which they have no control. They cannot control the fact that their children justifiably feel fear before taking these "do-or-die" (as one parent called them) tests and parents often feel that they have no control over the testing system at all.

The parent who addressed fear most often in relation to the MCAS said of the MCAS, "You know, um...I just think the whole thing is set up to kill these kids in Boston, in the inner-city" (C1 p. 17-18). And a parent in the focus group used similar language: "I just think it, kinda, kills the um...the self esteem of some, a lot of children, and, especially when, you know, like your school announces, 'oh, this school's doing so

bad.” Parents will do anything to protect their children from harm and to keep them safe. And yet they view this mandatory part of the education system as something that is “killing” their children. One wonders how difficult it must be for parents to work within an education system that they view in this way.

The majority of parents in this research would be willing to argue that the testing system, as it is now, should not continue because of the way it damages children’s chances of success and because of the way it is not set up to be an effective assessment of their learning. Many of these parents were more willing to criticize the MCAS than they were willing to criticize other parts of the school, as I have written before. However, when criticizing this part of the system, many parents still expressed a lack of agency or control over the issue.

Expressing a Lack of Agency

The parent who said that her child could not sleep the night before he took the MCAS said, “Uh, it’s not we can change it because it’s been assigned for majority, but I don’t think it’s a good idea with MCAS because it makes kids more afraid” (B2 p. 6). She has watched her child exhibit fearful behavior over this test, but she doesn’t see a possibility for changing the system. Two parents together, during the focus group, contributed to this statement: “And I just tell them [my children], ‘all you can do is just study, try to pay attention, sleep good.’” They did not think that there was anything else they could do to help their children navigate the MCAS. When I later asked the group if they felt that they would be heard if they did speak out against the MCAS, one parent said, “But that’s the problem with a lot of parents, especially in the community – they

don't, I'm sorry, in the community, they don't go after what they want. They talk about it amongst themselves, they fuss about it, but they won't go after and do anything." So in some ways, this lack of agency or control over the testing system emerges as something to be blamed on most parents. Parents enforce certain norms of involvement on others but they still don't feel that there is much they can do.

Another parent said she spoke to her child's middle school teachers about her concerns over the MCAS; those teachers understood her concerns but they could not talk about it because they were worried about their jobs. The parent said:

But I knew what they were trying to say. And, and I think of these kids who, keeping these kids down, because they, I go back to this too – they introduce welfare, ok, and it was supposed to only help, but then it became a control substance, ok. It's, it's like a drug, it became a control substance. And who did it control? (C1 p. 18).

She later answered her own question: "It kept minorities right where the government wanted them to be" (C1 p. 18). Interestingly, she went on to talk about how it is all about control and that you can't allow these parts of the system to consume you. She said, "You either let it eat you up and kill any of your dreams, or you override it, I said, and that's a choice you make" (C1 p. 20). While this parent began to talk about another topic, her line of thought is interesting – she talks about the MCAS as something that keeps kids down and she compares it to the welfare system and to a control substance. She spoke about the welfare system as something that worked to keep people down and therefore she may see the welfare system (and the MCAS) as things that people cannot fight against. However, she went on to argue that individuals have to make a choice between letting the system consume them and overriding that system. So she seems to go back

and forth between believing that the testing in the education system is a method of control that is designed to keep people down, and thus prevent resistance, and believing that individuals can choose to not allow the system to keep them down. Her beliefs about her own agency and the agency of her child in resisting the testing system are unclear but fascinating.

Another parent said about the MCAS, “I don’t agree with it, but there’s nothing I can do about it” (C2 p. 2). Most parents did feel free to critique the MCAS. While they did not all express the same critiques – not all parents spoke about how the test creates fear in their children, for example – the vast majority were highly skeptical of the system and most of those who were skeptical seemed to be so to the point of suggesting that their children should not have to take such tests. And yet, many went on to say that there may not be anything they can do about this serious problem in the system. And because many of them hold themselves responsible for their children’s educational success, we can assume that they will continue to help their children prepare for these tests with which they do not agree.

Interestingly, however, during the focus group, one parent did suggest that parents can speak up and demand change: “If it keeps failing out kids, it has to change...So I think parents can get involved, and that if we believe that it’s not just us, that it’s a system, then we need to change the system.” Such a statement was certainly atypical. Perhaps because this parent was among a group of peers, she felt more comfortable to begin to raise the possibility for demanding change.

Issues of Safety

In conducting this research, I began to see conceptual links between the issue of the MCAS and the issue of the children's physical safety that many parents brought up in interviews. I now will address a few themes that parents brought up in relation to safety and I will draw a few links between these two major issues. These links will continue to be made in the discussion section.

In relation to safety, three parents brought up the problem of the front door of the school. One parent, who said, "I think that safety would be number one, cause once a school is safe, it's easier for the teachers to teach" (A2 p. 16), addressed the issue of the front door of the school several times. She said that she was concerned about it but she appreciates the fact that the school has started to monitor the door by placing a guard there:

They just started that, they just started that, maybe within the last month. But that was one of my main concerns – the door used to be propped open with anything, I said, I mean not that there's a terrorist that was gonna come to the school, but just some street thugs or something might come in there, you know. So I was like really, for there to be elementary and high school, it's like, that was a great concern of ours (A2 p. 3).

She added that she likes the idea of a buzzer on the door – people should have to ring the buzzer and if no one lets them in, they can't get in to the school. This parent, despite being reassured by the school taking steps to add security at the front door, is still concerned about students being allowed to enter and exit through that door to go to lunch. She said, "I mean that's my concern there because let's say you get a gang or something or a couple of them go in there – there could probably be something really bad happen" (A2 p. 3). She said that the school is too open and safety is an issue as a result.

Another parent brought up very similar concerns about the door. She said:

Uh...the cleanliness of the school, um, what's the outdoor appearance, uh, is it a safe school, like I walked in here – the door was open. You know, what kind of, um, safety factor was there, you know, and when entering the school, you don't have cameras or anything so you don't know who's walking in the front door and we have had, you know, some sessions where it was unsafe. So I would be concerned about security, the safety of faculty, school, you know, and the students...(B1 p. 18).

And another parent brought up safety as a concern because, she said, "it's getting crazy" (C1 p. 20). When I asked if there was anything that the school could do to reassure parents or to show parents that they are working to increase the safety of the school, she said:

it's tough, you know, um, what could they do here? I don't know. I saw the sign out there [on the front door], "Do not put anything in the door to keep it open." But there is something in the door. So who put that there? Not a student. But, you see what I'm saying, so if you have rules and, adhere to those rules, right? Cause, what you're showing is that it's alright for me to do it, but you can't do it. [laughing] So that's one of the safety things, you know, is keeping it um, that could be a big plus, is not allowing the janitor or anyone to stick anything in there, you know, and I don't know how else (C1 p. 21).

This discussion of the door is about access – who has access to the school and, in turn, who has access to their children. Parents should be able to expect that the school will not allow people from the outside environment to have access to their children, but at the time of these interviews, the school was not able to guarantee this to parents. The school has since worked on this issue by hiring someone to monitor the door and prevent others from entering the school, but issues still arise, particularly at lunch time when students are allowed to leave and re-enter the building in large groups, as one parent addressed.

Many parents, when discussing safety, spoke about what the school needs to do – they made recommendations to the school that would make it a safer space. One parent

suggested that the school should have a buzzer and that it should have ID tags for visitors. Her other child's school does this; she acknowledged that it would be hard for the high school to have such a system but she believes that it could be done. She also suggested IDs for the students in order to help monitor them when they re-enter the school after lunch. She and another parent recommended that the school should institute a system of checking students' backpacks and lockers – they both acknowledged that this might be legally ambiguous but believe that it is necessary for the safety of the students.

One parent suggested that the school prohibit certain items:

I don't know. But the school is so small, um, do I believe in metal detectors being everywhere? No. But um, there should be a ban on a lot of things. A lot of things that the kids are allowed to bring to school...Um, but um...it's tough, you know, um, what could they do here? I don't know (C1 p. 21).

This parent is unsure about what needs to be done – she does not seem to believe that she has the knowledge to make recommendations or demands of the school – but she, like other parents, does believe that the school needs to do something to make the children more safe.

Another parent approached this idea in relation to a lack of communication:

Well, um...it was mentioned a couple of times at the meeting, um, but the funny thing is, if I never went to the [Family Council] meetings, I would have never known, well [my child has] told me, a couple of times – kids being arrested, stuff like that – so I kind of wonder, how's the safety of the school? Um...so that's a question, um, which actually never comes up...(C2 p. 14).

Here, she is saying many things – the only way she hears important news is through the Family Council meetings, so she presumably thinks that the school does not communicate about safety issues enough. She is concerned about the safety of the school because of things her child has told her. She said that her daughter tells her about a lot of

problems at the T stop by the school: “I think safety’s a, something they should think about, cause there’s a lot of problems at [the T stop], from what [my child’s] told me, um, but it’s never been mentioned” (C2 p. 14). She said that she spoke to an officer and he said he would try to get more officers at the T stop when the schools dismiss. So this parent did what she thought the school should have been doing – she proactively spoke to someone whom she believed could help make the area safer for her child and for other children. But she added once again that she hears nothing from the school in relation to this matter.

Once again, fear was a theme that emerged when parents were discussing the issue of safety, much as it emerged when some parents were discussing the MCAS. The parent who suggested that students’ backpacks should be searched said, “But it’s usually in one spot or in your locker, they insist on taking it everywhere they go, so that’s kind of scary on that note, you know” (A2 p. 4). One parent spoke about an incident in which another child was threatening to beat up her child, who was scared, but no one from the school called the parent to let her know. She later said that her child is sometimes scared to come home and to use the public transportation near the school. Another parent, when asked about safety, said:

Yeah, actually, this year, ok, last year was ok but this year they have like a lot of things going on then [inaudible] because the principal has a meeting with us and tell us what’s going on – yes, it is scary. But, you know, if you spend your time and talk to your kids, and keeping on telling your kids minding their business, stay out of the trouble, don’t walk in the crowd, probably is going to prevent a lot of issues, which, I been doing that every day with my kid. I talk to him every day. Concerned? Yes, because every day when he left for school, until he doesn’t get home, I don’t feel like, you know, I feel like it’s unsafe, you know, since like nothing happened with him, and you

know, it's like everywhere you go, you concerned about everything (B2 p. 5-6).

These parents understandably are concerned and fearful about what is going on in the school and what kinds of environments their children are walking around in, both inside and outside of school. The last parent quoted here worries about her child from when he leaves for school in the morning until he comes home. With the violence in some Boston neighborhoods, it is understandable why parents would be fearful for their children to be walking through some streets. These parents should not have to worry about their children's safety when they are inside the school, but they do. And while the school is working on some of these issues – by hiring a guard for the front door, for example – most parents still have serious reservations about the level of safety in the school, about who has access to the school and to their children, and about what the school tells them or fails to tell them in regards to their children's safety.

Despite the fact that many parents, possibly these parents included, would argue that the school is not doing enough to keep their children safe, they still place their own responsibility squarely in the middle of the issue and they enforce this expectation on other parents: “But, you know, if you spend your time and talk to your kids, and keeping on telling your kids minding their business, stay out of the trouble, don't walk in the crowd, probably is going to prevent a lot of issues, which, I been doing that every day with my kid. I talk to him every day” (B2 p. 5-6). I mentioned a parent previously who, because her child said she did not feel safe on her way home, took it upon herself to talk to some transportation officials to get more security at the nearby T stop. Another parent said:

But um, in the schools, you know, you're hearing so much about kids, kids just...that's the other thing, the kids just don't have that, I don't know what you would call it, they just give up, and their out is to kill, you know, um. But the parents – if they, if they get involved, are you gonna deter that? No, but you might be able to see signs...in the environment you have, because uh, it doesn't matter if you're, you know, poor or wealthy – it's happening across the board, you know, um, and that to me is a sign that something is lacking with the connection, even at home and at school, you know what I mean? For you not to know that your child has guns in the house, you know, you see what I'm saying? So, that involvement at school and home, I think, is gonna be, that's a big key, you know, um, it just, you know, teachers have to still give that hundred percent, you know, but parents as a whole, just, it's support, really. Support for your child and your teachers, really (C1 p. 21).

This parent does suggest that teachers have a role in preventing violence and in maintaining the mental stability of children, but she also enforces the idea that all parents must be involved and supportive in all aspects of their children's lives. So again, parents are critical of the school in many ways in relation to the safety of their children, but they continue to place much responsibility on themselves for their children's safety and they enforce this norm on other parents, as well. They may not feel that they can force the school to take greater steps in regards to their children's safety – they seem to stop short of demanding more work on the part of the school and instead they increase the expectations of themselves and other parents.

In this section, I discussed the parents' perceptions of the MCAS and how that test shapes their experiences with the school. Many parents were very critical of the MCAS, but they also argued that there was not much they could do to change the testing system. In this section, I drew some links between how parents addressed the MCAS and how they addressed the safety of the school. In regards to the MCAS, parents were concerned about its content, its connection to the classes that their children take, its

emphasis in the schools, and its relevance to their lives and communities. They also addressed how the test creates fear in their children. In regards to safety, parents again addressed fear, the amount of access that people have to the school and to their children, and the recommendations they would suggest to make the school safer. Again, with regards to both of these issues, parents were willing to provide critiques but they often stopped short of demanding change. In the discussion section that follows, I suggest some explanations for why the parents felt this way about these issues and about their own agency.

Discussion of the Theme of Institutional Issues and Agency

In this section, I will continue to make links between these two issues – the MCAS and safety – while also attempting to take these subjects further and draw out issues that parents discussed.

In regards to the MCAS, the idea that children's learning time is being wasted or used inappropriately to prepare for these tests is a concern that many parents expressed. Some parents are also concerned that their children are penalized on these tests for not having the right socioeconomic knowledge. The example of a test question about a guest bedroom is particularly interesting and heartbreaking. I will focus on this one example of a culturally irrelevant question that a parent brought up with me to raise questions about how parents are affected by the education system. In our society, parents are held responsible for providing for their children and assuring that their living situation – food, clothes, home – is adequate. If a parent provides a home in which her children do not have their own bedrooms, or a home in which her children have to share a room with

siblings, how will she be judged? And if her child then answers this question on the MCAS incorrectly because he or she has not been exposed to guest bedrooms, who is at fault for this incorrect answer? Is the parent to blame for not exposing her child to this kind of information? Li writes that the cultural capital of oppressed populations is often “filtered out” of schools, against the will of those populations. It is against the will of the parents and their children for the state tests to ask questions that are not relevant to their lives. But these tests do ask such questions. Such filtering of knowledge, according to Li, can be “‘against their will’ through language, examinations, and certifications, or, in Bourdieu’s terms, Pedagogical Actions (PA). These pedagogical actions are seen as symbolic violence that arbitrates the space of social positions among different cultural groups” (2008: 163). Some therefore have argued that these examinations and systemic judgments of competency are a form of symbolic violence.

Parents and their children suffer through this symbolic violence. The parents did not tend to blame themselves or to place responsibility on themselves for the fact that their children often struggle with these tests. Why are they able to divorce themselves of responsibility for this aspect of the education system, but not for other aspects of the education system? What about the MCAS allows them to be more critical and less quick to jump to a discourse of individual responsibility? I would argue that the reason so many parents felt free to critique the MCAS is because they see these tests as part of the larger (violent) system and not as something that has been instituted by a particular individual to whom they can point. The MCAS is a relatively new part of the system that threatens their children, and any resultant rage among parents is justified. As a result,

they feel more comfortable addressing their serious issues with the tests and their serious concerns about how these tests are jeopardizing their children's learning and futures. In other words, parents understand the MCAS to be a form of structural oppression; teachers and school officials, however, are individuals – they may be flawed (oppressive) individuals but they are harder to critique because they are human beings and not structures.

To continue this difference between structural and individual critique, many parents noted that they recognize the differences between urban and suburban schools. Although they addressed this in different ways, at least half of the parents, if not more, mentioned these inequities in our education system. So they know that the larger “system” is putting their children at a disadvantage, merely because of where they live and the neighborhood in which they go to school. And because the system functions in such a way as to allow certain schools to receive far fewer resources than others, the system is allowing their children to receive an unequal education. One result is that the children in urban schools have a much harder time passing the MCAS, or simply finding classes that will prepare them for the test. As a result, the MCAS becomes a form of violence because it allows conditions to persist in which the students are not safe from harm. The system of testing and a lack of a safe environment, then, are part of the structural core of inequity in our education system. Many parents may see their children as “set up” by a system which they are willing to critique. Their children are being set up to fail or to not graduate, which keeps them in harm's way, and parents are willing to critique this amorphous, nameless system that so sets up their children. However, they

often do not feel that they have the agency or the power to truly change that which they critique. Inner-city parents, once again, must swallow their rage due to a lack of power and control. And to be clear, I am not blaming them for this lack of control – it is structural and it continually puts them in impossible situations.

In relation to the MCAS, taking any kind of responsibility for their children's performance must become impossible for parents. They are responsible for their children's success, according to them, and the system demands that students pass the MCAS to be successful. But these parents, almost unanimously, denounce the MCAS for many different reasons. Some even see it as mentally and emotionally threatening to their children – it threatens to hold them back from graduating, it sets them up to fail, and it causes them great fear. One parent went so far as to say that these tests are “set up to kill” the children. So how can the parents resolve these contradictions? How can they continue to be responsible for their children's education while also questioning this part of the system? How can they help their children succeed in high school, and finish high school, while also deconstructing the MCAS because it prevents such success? And if they see the MCAS as so threatening to their children, should they support its existence in the system at all?

They are willing to critique the system, but what are the consequences of such a critique? Fine and Weis write, “In low-income public high schools organized around control through silence, the student, parent, teacher, or paraprofessional who talks, tells, or wants to speak transforms rapidly into the subversive, the troublemaker” (2003: 31). One parent alluded to this when she addressed the fact that some teachers were reluctant

to critique the MCAS with her out of fear for their jobs. Again, it seems that parents are in an impossible situation – they want to challenge the parts of the system that threaten their children, and yet if they do too much critiquing and are labeled as “troublemakers,” will school authorities stop listening to them? What effect will that status have on their children? Again, they must swallow their rage as inner-city parents of color who are poor or working class.

Parents also discussed that they believe their children’s physical safety is threatened when they are in the school and this concern is justified. Research has shown that tens of thousands of American schoolchildren stay home from school at least once a month because they are fearful for their safety (Fenning, Wilczynski, and Parraga 2000: 176). Anyone, at the time that I conducted these interviews, could enter the school and walk around freely; parents were extremely concerned about this lack of screening of individuals who would then have access to their children. One can imagine the fear that both of these issues cause – parents cannot prevent the government from accessing their children and threatening them through the MCAS and, similarly, they cannot prevent outside forces from accessing their children through the front door of the school.

Poverty and racism in this country are forms of structural violence; the fact that these parents’ children are in a school that is not serving them, because of their economic situation and race, means that these children experience structural violence on a daily basis. The parents see the lack of safety in the school and the unfair tests that their children must take as integral parts of this structural violence that their children experience, but the parents feel little ability to quell this violence. Despite the fact that

the parents were very willing to criticize the whole system of testing, they expressed a lack of agency when it came to changing the MCAS – they think they know what must change in the system but they do not seem to think that they can help to bring about these changes. And not feeling able to make recommendations in one area may cause parents to feel that they cannot make recommendations or demands in another area. This could explain why some parents said they were concerned about the safety of the school but did not know what else the school could do. However, the parents, as a result of living their lives, may feel that they have more experiential knowledge that allows them to figure out how to deal with issues of safety more adequately than the MCAS. Only one parent made a concrete suggestion for how to undo the testing system, but several parents spoke about how they prepare their children to deal with a lack of safety – they tell their children where they can walk and not walk, they tell their children what to do if someone picks a fight with them, they tell their children what buses and trains to take and not take, and one parent spoke to transportation officials to try to improve the safety on the train that her child takes after school. Parents understand their children to be facing structural assaults from the tests and a lack of school safety. They do not feel able to exercise any control over the tests but they seem to feel minimal control over the safety of their children.

For some parents, the only control they may have over their children's safety is to help ensure that those children graduate and move on with their lives. The parental desire for a child to go to college or to “get away” after high school is the desire for that child to be safe – parents want their children to get away from some of the dangers in Boston and

to move on to safe lives in which they are successful. So we must wonder, what does it mean if a child is not allowed to graduate? What options are left for that child in his or her life and how will a lack of a diploma affect his or her freedom from harm in the future? What must it mean for these parents to know that a test (that many of them consider to be arbitrary and poorly designed) can stand in the way of their children moving on to safer spaces? A child who does not pass these tests could be seen as a “failed citizen,” and because of the structural violence of poverty and racism, the consequences of this failure for a child in the inner city are much more acute and threatening. The fear that parents must feel is not something that I am qualified to describe. The principal of the school once told parents at a Family Council meeting that no child has not graduated from the school because of the MCAS. Do the parents, both those at the Family Council meeting and others, believe this?

Again, we can see how these two issues are intricately connected with each other and with issues of agency. Parents want their children to be able to graduate from high school so that they can move on to other things and leave the school hallways that many parents do not believe are safe. But the students cannot successfully leave the school, with a diploma, unless they pass these flawed tests over which parents do not feel able to exercise any control. Parents feel free to critique these tests, but they do not feel that they can change them. They feel free to discuss the safety of the school, but they often are willing to excuse the school for not providing more safety measures. The feelings of powerlessness and desperation that parents must feel over these issues are easy to

imagine. Again, I am not blaming parents for this powerlessness – it arises out of the structure of the system.

How Parents Experience Classes, Curriculum, and Homework

Many parents want to speak about their children's classes and the school curriculum. The parents seem to personalize what their children learn and to experience their children's homework and learning difficulties as their own challenges. In this section, I will discuss how parents feel about what their children are learning, why they feel that they often cannot help with that learning, and what expectations they put on themselves and other parents as a result.

To start, many parents seem to struggle with the fact that learning is different from when they went to school or from when their younger children went to school. These changes make it difficult for the parents to process what their children are learning now and how they are learning. One parent said:

Um...well, I think the learning process has changed. Like, when my kids first started out, when they went into the new math, I would go to school to be taught so I could help my children at home with their homework...Um, so I, that's lacking, because I had the opportunity with my other kids – I could go to school and learn myself so when they came home, I could be with them. I have no clue what they're doing mathwise, I'm just at a complete loss (B1 p. 6).

This parent used to be able to go to school to learn about what her children were doing but she finds that opportunity to be lacking now; and because the math curriculum, and other curriculum, continues to change, she finds herself “at a complete loss.” She later said:

Uh, but...for some reason, um, I just don't like this openness with these teachers, you know, um, and again, I'm basing it on when I went to school

and I know I'm in time of change, but I felt as though in my learning process, I got more out of stuff than what I see today. And um, maybe because it's a new technique, you know, a new way of teaching or whatever, and I have to get a, you know, learn about it, um, but I, um...I just, I just, a couple of teachers, I just didn't like the way they talked, you know, to students (B1 p. 9).

So this parent sees changes in the teaching profession from when she went to school that she is not comfortable with – she doesn't like the way teachers speak to students and she also feels that changes over time have led to children getting less out of the learning process. She does, however, suggest that perhaps she is the one who needs to learn about the new techniques, instead of suggesting that teachers need to consider the past techniques with which parents are familiar.

Another parent said:

It's hard – a lot of work, and the hardest thing, I think, is to, even with both girls, both my girls, I went, I went to high school, I went to a four-year college, but the stuff that they're doing now, I have no clue what it is. I can figure out an answer, but not the way they're taught, you know, I was like, "I can get you the answer, but I can't tell you how to do it," because I learned it different than what they're learning now... So that's been a little frustrating, the way they're just teaching now...(C2 p. 13).

Because these parents come from different times or different knowledge backgrounds, many express that they simply cannot help their children with classwork or homework because they do not understand it. To continue a quote from above, one parent expressed:

I have no clue what they're doing mathwise, I'm just at a complete loss. I could not help her in math cause I do not understand this – she understands it but I don't understand it, so...I've met with her math teacher, and they say she's doing great, you know, so I don't need to help, thank goodness [laughing] for that cause I wouldn't know how to help her...I just, I couldn't help her that way, you know [laughing] (B1 p. 6).

I wonder what this parent's response would be if her child were having a problem in math class – how would her meetings go with the teacher in that situation and what would this parent need to do if she had to figure out a way to help? Would she be able to laugh off her (very common) inability to tutor her child in high school mathematics if such tutoring were required?

The discussion of not being able to help or understand a child's work was consistently related to math class. Another parent said:

That's like when he, certain things he'll bring home, like, they're teaching kids math totally different, and um, and um, my background is finance, so um, I'll say, "you need to get examples from your teacher – more examples." Um...there's not enough information, you know what I'm saying? I don't, I, to me, I, and I'll send him back and say, "you need to ask for this, this, this and this." Do I always get that? No, you know (C1 p. 3).

This parent reaches out to teachers to help herself understand the work so that she can help her child, and those teachers do not always comply. She is trying to understand the curriculum in order to help but she is not receiving the resources that she needs. Another parent continued her previous point:

And I was a math major, and I [both laughing], I, like, you know, like, I can get the answer, but I can't teach it to them, because the way they learned it, the way they're learning it now, it's obsolete than what I've learned. And we work on that a lot, I'm like, "ok, I get the answer, you get your answer, then we go from there," but I can't teach it to them, you know, but you know, the math I took was like twenty years ago and it's nothing like today. Which, you know, I say to my daughter, "I don't understand – math is math," [laughing], you know, "why can't we all just get along?" She starts laughing [laughing]. But yeah, that's been hard too, just, you know, my other daughter's in sixth grade, and it's the same thing – sixth-grade math, you know, and I laugh about that show, "Are You Smarter Than a Fifth-Grader?," I'm like, "no," [laughing]. No, twenty years ago, maybe, but no, definitely (C2 p. 13).

She added:

So, I think, and, it's just real funny, you know, um...a friend of mine was saying, "oh, you should go back to school, get this, get that." I said, "I can't even do my kid's homework [laughing], you think I can do homework? Uh uh." So that's been, like, like I said, the classes they take now, you can't even help...(C2 p. 13).

This parent's feeling that she can't help her children with their homework or understand what they are doing in school, despite her own prior education, has come to affect how she sees her own life and what she feels comfortable attempting. Because she cannot figure out her child's math homework, she does not feel that she should go back to school herself. If she were to go back to school, which would be a very difficult endeavor for her as a working parent, she eventually may be able to earn more and worry less about her children's futures. But the fact that the curriculum of the school is taught in a way that prohibits her involvement with it has led her to curtail her *own* options.

This same parent made an interesting statement in defense of all parents:

So that's been, like, like I said, the classes they take now, you can't even help, you know, so that's like why I was hoping the school, it's not that some of the parents just are dumb or just don't know, but what we learned is totally different than what they're learning now, you know. I mean, I, my, she's in sixth grade now, but I think in fourth grade she was doing word problems. I didn't get word problems till I was in college, you know, we had to write a paragraph with the answer. I'm like, "whoa." [laughing] So it's different...So, it's been different from when I went to school, definitely, um, so I think they should have, offer a little resources more [laughing] to the kids [laughing], because unfortunately, the parents just don't know, you know. It's not that we're incapable, we just, we weren't learn, we didn't learn the things that they're learning now, you know. Especially, you know, the math, I mean, and I was a math major (C2 p. 13-14).

She is reacting against judgments that are made of parents, either implicitly or explicitly. She makes a point to state that parents are not dumb or incapable; there are messages in society and in the school, perhaps, that lead her to worry that that is how she and other

parents are perceived by the teachers and school authorities. She feels the need to respond to those judgments and defend herself and other parents from them. Her solution or recommendation is that the school needs to offer more resources to the children – possibly in the form of tutors or extra help – to make up for the fact that the parents generally have not been exposed to the material that their children are learning.

Another concern that many parents expressed is that learning is not happening in the school; some also expressed concern that what their children are learning is not what they should be or need to be learning. One parent said:

Um, but I have to, I have to adapt myself to the new learning process because to me, it's like, they're not teaching them any – that's my personal feeling. They're not teaching them anything, but yet she does a lot of work, so, it's their style of teaching that I have to know what it's about, you know, and I told her that I was going to come visit the class (B1 p. 10).

This statement is mainly about this parent's concern that the teachers are not teaching anything, but it links into many other themes, as well. The parent puts some responsibility on herself to adapt to the learning process, which is different from what she has experienced in the past, and she brings up the idea that she must have a physical presence in the school in order to assess the effectiveness of the learning process.

Another parent said about the MCAS and math curriculum in general:

They [other parents] even, we talk about the math that they're teaching these kids – scaling a building. How many kids are going to become an architect? And that's on their MCAS – it makes no, it makes no sense. What happened to the basic math? Even go to the store today and give a kid ten dollars, and they can't – a twenty-year old kid, and they can't count back the change to you. If that computer's down, you can forget it...If they can't plug in twenty dollars, minus out eleven dollars, no (C1 p. 17).

She wants her child to be able to function after high school and perform in any type of job that he may choose. But she is concerned that the curriculum, particularly the math, that he is learning now is not even preparing him to work as a cashier; the curriculum and how the school chooses to teach it are doing a serious disservice to her child, according to this parent. She does not believe that the appropriate learning is taking place in his classes, or at least in his math classes. But because she relates this to the MCAS, she might also feel a lack of agency or ability to change the system.

Another parent said:

...I like this school, um, I haven't heard positive things about the school, um, [my child], she's a little iffy about coming back next year, um, because she feels what she's learning she already knows, and um, cause she asked me actually when we left yesterday – I think she said she thinks she wants to go to another school...(C2 p. 3).

This parent at other times expressed her concern over her ability to help her child get into college – she must be frustrated to know that her child does not think she is learning new things or progressing because both the parent and the child already are concerned about the college application process:

I think they work with students to [apply to college], I mean, they would have to, I mean, that would be a real disappointment to me if they didn't, um, definitely, um, because other schools do it, you know, um, I think they should put – I'm not sure how much a pilot school can do, I'm not sure the difference, but I think they should, um, help kids get scholarships...I don't really know the process of what they do, but I hope they help. I hope that when [my child] gets in twelfth, I don't know when they start, but I'm hoping when she gets to that stage, that they would help her, there'd be somebody that will go over her essay, ok, because I haven't taken English in twenty years, but I'm hoping like, I don't know, they give them a class, or somebody, somebody's there to support them, you know, besides the parents, you know, to encourage them to do the things they need to do to fill out the application. I mean, cause I know it's a lot more than just filling out your name, so I'm hoping [laughing] (C2 p. 11).

This parent wants to ensure that someone is going to help her child get into college and she has many hopes for what the school will do in this process. The fact that her child does not feel like she is learning anything new this year must be a huge concern because this would be damaging to the child's level of preparation for college. The parent discussed the fact that she doesn't know the process for applying to college and she also does not feel that her own skills are current enough to help her child with her college applications. So several themes converge here in the parent's words – not feeling that she can help as a parent, worrying that her child is not learning the right things, and defending herself against any judgments that might be made of her as a parent.

One parent's opinions on this issue – whether or not the students are learning the right things, or learning at all – changed during her interview. First, she said:

Um...I just think that the, the teaching and the things that are going on in Boston Public Schools, these kids are not into it, they're not, you know. I mean, most kids nowadays are not really interested in school. So I don't know whether it's the teachers are not teaching them things that they want to hear or doing things that, I don't know, to get kids in tune to, to school. I don't know what it is (D1 p. 7).

She was concerned that students today are not learning because they are, for the most part, not interested in what is being taught. This parent spoke about her child who recently dropped out of high school. She therefore had a serious personal interest in the fact that students are not learning and teachers are not keeping them interested in school.

But later, she said:

The teaching, I mean, is like, to me, it's different than when I was taught, but I mean, it doesn't seem [inaudible], they're still teaching new things that you need to learn and know in life, you know, so they're getting the learning, there's somebody there to teach them things. What they want to sit there and

learn and take it all in – it's up to them, you know. They want to come in and act up or tune it out or whatever, then they're the ones gonna lose from it, you know, so...(D1 p. 14).

She touched on the idea that times are different. She also began to place the responsibility on the children to either learn and “take it all in” or not – she said that the teaching is happening and students must decide if they will benefit from it or not. It is unclear what caused this parent's change in thinking – perhaps she became concerned about critiquing the teaching at this particular school or perhaps she simply revised her own ideas about who has the most responsibility for the learning process. Regardless of what caused her change in opinion, she is thinking about the effectiveness of the current learning process. Her child dropping out must have had a serious effect on her feelings about this issue. Lastly, one parent linked what she sees as inappropriate learning to the MCAS:

Yeah and it's because of the, um, the requirements and it's, and it's not, you know, they're gonna say, “well, you know, half these kids are not prepared for X, Y, and Z.” And now like this whole MCAS thing is not gonna settle it, it's not gonna settle it. But, there's other dynamics that, that come into play (D2 p. 11).

She argues that academic requirements and the institution of a punitive testing system are not going to “settle it” – someone still needs to determine why students are not learning and what to do about that.

A theme of parents needing to be “trained” emerged in their discussions of curriculum, classes, and homework. Parents had the mentality, at times, that it is the parents who need to change and be “trained” in order to help their children. One parent said that she used to be able to go to school and learn how to help her children, but that

option has been taken away. She said, “We still have a lot of illiteracy about parents, and they have no clue how to help their child at home, and I think that emphasis needs to be on those parents – how does one help their child when they come home, uh, you know, that needs help with the homework or whatever” (B1 p. 6). She is upset that some of these options have been taken away because they used to help parents learn what their children were learning; she believes that that emphasis must be back on the parents and they should be trained to help their children with homework. During the focus group, one parent spoke about the “math night” that was held for parents at her other child’s elementary school. She described the night as “awesome.”

Another parent said of the teachers, “everyone is very approachable, um, they try to, um, make you understand what they’re trying to teach the kids” (C1 p. 2). Although she was giving a positive review of teachers, this parent did describe her interactions with teachers as attempts on the part of teachers to “make” the parents understand what is being taught in the school. In this case, in this very short excerpt, the parent does not suggest that the teachers asked for her input about classes and curriculum. No parent suggested that a teacher had ever asked for this kind of parental input. Instead, they want the parents to work to understand and adapt themselves to the curriculum. This parent later said that parents should:

Be more involved, you know, um, parents need to really get more involved. They need to come up if they don’t understand something, and it’s not going to be easy for a lot of parents, but they need to come here if there’s classes that will teach you the basic English, basic math, you know, which the kids aren’t learning basic math (C1 p. 4).

So again, the parents need to come to the school and learn what their children are learning and acquire skills that will help them to help their children. This parent doesn't expect the teachers to ask parents for recommendations on what they should be teaching.

Parents were willing to enforce this need to acquire training onto other parents. One parent said that she would advise other parents to: "Uh, stay on top of the teachers, stay on top of your child, and make sure that they're connecting and they're on the same page and that the work is being done, work is being produced" (B1 p. 17). At least two parents stressed the need for parents who do not understand what is being taught to come into the school to learn the content. One parent prefaced this idea with "parents need to really get more involved" (C1 p. 4). She later advised other parents: "Support, first of all, support your child. And, even if you're not educated, get involved. You know what I mean? I mean, you can't just come out and say that, but, even if you don't feel as though you can help them academically, just get involved" (C1 p. 20). Another parent said, "you just have to keep, keep abreast of what your kid's doing. You know, every now and then, you gotta check into them, you know, find out what kind of work they're doing, what they're studying, and stuff like that, you know" (D1 p. 12). It is extremely difficult for most parents to find time to come to school and be "trained" in this way, but that is an expectation that these parents were willing to enforce upon themselves and others.

To summarize this section, the parents expressed a high degree of concern over what their children were learning. They experience their children's homework and learning difficulties as their own challenges and they see themselves as responsible to help their children in whatever way they can. Despite the fact that parents said they

learned different things when they were in school, and that they just can't help with homework sometimes, and that they worry that their children are not learning the right things in school, they still largely expect themselves to figure it out and be involved in the learning process. They also expect other parents to adapt to the curriculum and learning process in order to help their children.

Discussion of the Theme of Classes, Curriculum, and Homework

Schools often neglect to value the cultural capital and knowledge that inner-city students and their parents bring to school with them. We must listen to parents in order to understand their experiences with schools and to understand what knowledge and resources they can contribute to the schools. We must move away from the idea that students and parents are somehow deficient because they do not bring certain kinds of knowledge or resources with them when they enter the schools. It is important to look at how schools devalue the wisdom and contributions of parents, but this devaluation does not occur because parents are lacking in any way.

In our society, parents often are expected to "improve" themselves and to have the knowledge to support their children, no matter what. They are told that they should get enough education to be able to earn enough money to support their children on their own; and they enforce this expectation on themselves and others. Many of these parents see differences between what past generations learned and what their children are learning now, but society tells them that it is up to them to adapt. It is easy to imagine the frustration of these parents. One parent, for example, did what she was "supposed" to do by finishing high school and going to college, and yet that was not enough to allow her to

help her children with their homework because of the way times and teaching have changed. Because of the consistent societal blame that falls on parents, then, she faces the danger of being blamed when her children do not do well in math, despite her best efforts. If a parent can't identify with what her child is learning, she has no way to monitor that learning and to be sure that it is appropriate. This inability to monitor learning must create tension and concern in some parents, along with a feeling of helplessness.

Some parents suggested extra tutors and assistance for their children because they themselves cannot help with some homework. Making this suggestion might be hard for parents; not being able to help with homework must make them feel as though they are not living up to their responsibilities. The only thing they can do in response is to request resources that will make up for their own supposed "deficiencies." One parent clearly was dealing with the construction of herself (and other parents) as deficient because she used the words "dumb" and "incapable." She was reacting against such a construction, insisting that parents should not be described in this way, but she cannot help but be affected by these words. It seems that the school curriculum forces some parents to see themselves as deficits and they then have to work on acquiring assets for their children in order to make up for their own supposed deficits. If the school were to ask for their input, it is likely that parents would immediately begin to see themselves in a more asset-oriented way.

Some parents spoke about visiting the school to ensure that their children are learning in their classes. Some parents also made strong claims that their children are

not, in fact, learning enough or learning the right things in their classes. This is a statement of authority: “Claiming common sense against this ‘expert’ advice was a way to assert one’s own authority to judge what is ‘really useful knowledge’” (Luttrell 1997: 27). But visiting the school to check on the learning process in order to confirm or deny that her children are not learning the right things could put the parent in a difficult situation. If she confirmed that learning was not occurring, what would she be able to do about it? Would her discovery be threatening to teachers if she addressed it with them? She would be fulfilling her own responsibilities, but how would she take action without making the teachers feel as though she was disrespecting them? Again, this would be a very difficult situation for parents.

The curriculum that these parents often cannot help with, and that they sometimes feel is not what their children should be learning, is intricately connected to the MCAS. If the parents do not feel that they can change the MCAS, then they may feel incapable of changing the inappropriate curriculum and learning processes that they see. Luttrell writes that this lack of hope or lack of respect for parent’s knowledge, in her study, “kept them [parents] from acknowledging the full range of their abilities. The false yet clear split between what they ‘knew’ and what school wanted them to know fragmented their self-understandings and compromised their claims to knowledge and power” (1997: 66). If parents know that what is being taught is not right, but cannot express this, feelings of powerlessness must arise.

Many parents discussed that they wanted to exercise some power by helping their children get into college. This desire to help their children gain access to college means

that they want their children to be able to successfully leave this school and go on to a safer environment. But if they feel that the school is not teaching their children enough to be able to do that, the parents must feel yet more fear.

Many parents spoke about needing to adapt themselves to what was taught and what went on in the schools, instead of the school needing to adapt to the parents' knowledge. If the classes and the curriculum that are offered, then, are culturally irrelevant or not what the parents and families believe their children should be learning, that does not matter. Instead of the school and teachers modifying the curriculum, it is the parents and the families who should be "modified." Vincent writes:

[I]t is arguable that many curriculum intervention schemes seek to make the home function like the school. Parents are encouraged to structure their interactions with their children in ways that the school considers 'good practice'...the rigidity of such ideals can lead to parents feeling guilty and inadequate, and to professionals developing negative views of those who do not adopt such standards (Vincent 1996: 47).

Again, this dynamic of schools, which many parents addressed, contributes to the idea that parents are deficient and in need of being "fixed," instead of an asset to the schools and the children.

In regards to curriculum and learning, the parents once again place a lot of responsibility on themselves and they enforce certain expectations on others. Even though some parents do not agree with the curriculum, or believe that the learning process in the school is adequate, they still burden themselves with the need to adapt. The placing of this burden becomes a method of enforcement – they enforce dominant parental norms on themselves and on other parents because they are fearful of what will

happen or how they will be perceived if they do not. Teachers and school officials will make damaging assumptions about them if they do not adapt in this way. Many parents expressed that all parents should go to the school, be familiar with what is being taught, ensure that their children are doing the work, adjust themselves to what is going on in the school, and be involved no matter what their educational backgrounds are. Even if they do this, though, they might not be deemed “intelligent” by school authorities because they are only doing what parents are *supposed* to do in our society:

Self-taught skills such as helping children with homework were not awarded the distinction of ‘real intelligence.’ For example, their mastery of the ‘new math’ skills that they learned as part of helping their children do homework was seen as evidence of ‘motherwise’ knowledge or ‘problem solving’ – the ability to ‘balance a lot of things, if that counts,’ not as ‘real intelligence’ (Luttrell 1997: 30).

By arguing that other parents should adopt these practices and be involved in their children’s schools in this way, these parents are enforcing the societal message that parents must be involved and that they are not doing anything special. They are merely doing what they should be doing.

Parents are willing to enforce certain expectations on themselves and on other parents, but none of these parents ever suggested that teachers should speak to them and get their input on the curriculum and learning process. Parents are the main experts on their children and they would have many suggestions about what their children need to and want to learn. They also have many ideas about how their children learn best and what types of lessons would be helpful to their children. Many parents also would be willing to go into school, if their work schedules allowed, to share their own expertise, skills, and knowledge. But it does not seem that the teachers are attempting to establish

such reciprocal relationships with the parents. Instead, the parents are the ones who must adjust and get “involved.” And they, for the most part, seem to accept this and enforce this norm on other parents. If they did not, they might be actively excluded from their children’s education, and that risk is too large to take.

Conclusion

I worked closely with these parents to get their complex thoughts about their children’s high school. These interviews did not result in *all* negative opinions – these parents do have hope for the school and for their children. They hope that their children will do well in their classes, go on to college or work after high school, and do whatever makes them happy and healthy. I do not want the readers of this paper to assume that these parents have no hope – in fact, they have a lot of hope. They hope for great success and happiness for their children, despite the fact that the children are being educated in an inherently unequal and racist system. If the parents can have hope, then I am in no position to suggest that this situation is hopeless. And I want to clarify that when I suggest that parents stopped short of demanding change, I was not suggesting that they did not have the voice or deserve the voice to make such demands; instead, I believe that parents often limit themselves in this way because of a history of not being heard. This is something that must not be read as a critique of the parents, therefore, but rather as an argument for how parents must begin to be seen as stakeholders who *do* have the right to make demands of their children’s schools.

Oftentimes these parents feel a lack of power and a lack of agency. These feelings are made more difficult by the fact that parents feel the need to enforce dominant

norms of parental involvement on themselves and on other parents. The situation is made more difficult by the fact that school authorities regularly fail to communicate with parents about important issues. The situation is made more difficult by the fact that the children must pass the MCAS to graduate and the parents believe that test is extremely unfair and unnecessary. The situation is made more difficult by the fact that parents often feel incapable of helping with homework and the school is not reaching out to parents to find out what they would like their children to learn. But again, if the parents have hope, then we all must have hope.

According to Griffith and Smith, “the public school system comes to operate as an engine of inequality,” in part because schools are organized around an assumption of the middle-class status of families (2005: 10). Based on their work and on my findings, then, we must reform the ways that schools understand and interact with parents. Not all parents have the class background and the resources that would enable them to interact with schools in the way that our society expects. Instead of continuing to abide by these expectations and norms, then, school officials must question how their parental outreach strategies are classed and they must change those strategies in order to reach as many parents as possible and in order to ensure that all parents feel like legitimate and listened-to stakeholders in their children’s schools.

Theorist Annette Lareau began such work by examining how different parenting styles, dependent on social class, affect the perspectives of children and parents when it comes to educational institutions. However, her work enforces a deficit model by arguing that working-class and poor parents often raise their children in a way that

disadvantages those children in schools and in other societal institutions (2003). Instead of using such a model based on deficits, then, we must speak to the parents about how *they* understand their assets and how *they* believe they can contribute to their children's schools. I attempted to take this step with this research. If we continue to look at what parents in urban communities are missing or lacking, and if we continue to only look at how they must "fix" themselves in order to be agents in their children's schools, we are doing an extreme disservice to these parents and we are not working to reform schools in a way that empowers parents and children.

Luttrell spoke to women about their experiences with schools and she looked at how "[t]heir stories provide critical insights into schools as arenas of struggle where selfhood, identities, values, and knowledge are contested and where only certain students garner respect as a 'somebody'" (1997: 53-54). Like Luttrell, I argue that we must take this type of research directly to the parents – they must be allowed to construct their stories of their children's educations (and their own educations) and they must be allowed to tell us how they see their identities as wrapped up within their children's schools. They must be allowed to demand that they and their children be seen as "somebody." If we look at the issue from this perspective, and if we bring the parents into the work of examining the problems and constructing the possible solutions, the students and their parents will benefit. These families in urban communities whose children attend under-resourced schools are surviving in situations of severe injustice – they must not be silenced anymore.

If I were able to continue this research, I would like to investigate how helping their children navigate such a flawed education system affects parents. What is it like for them to tutor their children or encourage them to study and prepare for the MCAS, which they do not think their children should be taking? What is it like to help your child prepare for a test that you understand as a literal threat against him and his emotional well-being? What is it like to send your child to a school that you do not believe is safe? What is it like to have your child bring home schoolwork that does not have any relation to what you learned when you were in school? What is it like to not be able to help your teenager with her homework? What is it like to feel as though your child's teachers do not want to communicate with you or do not feel the need to keep you informed? What does it feel like to place the vast majority of the responsibility for your child's education on yourself? The social and psychological effects of this current situation on parents must be many and future research should look at these effects and how they cause parents to be involved or uninvolved in their children's schools.

There are many other subjects that I did not have the time or space to investigate. How do the gender and generation of parents affect their perceptions of the schools and how they interact with those schools? While I refer to all parents as "she" here, I did interview some fathers, as I addressed at the beginning of this paper. If I had more time and more resources, I would like to look at differences among mothers, fathers, aunts, grandmothers, etc., and examine how gender and generation affect the experiences of these caretakers in the schools. Additionally, what is unique about the experiences of single parents in comparison to parents who are raising children with partners? The

situation of single parents is always unique and if I were to continue this research, I would like to examine their particular experiences. Lastly, I would like to examine these questions about parental involvement in relation to the drop-out crisis. How do parents understand this crisis, what do they tell their children about it, and do they think that schools are doing enough to protect their children from this crisis? Obviously, this research raised more questions than it answered and there is more to be done. But what is most important is that any work that moves forward based on these research questions begins from the perspective and the experiences of the parents and families.

Our education system is extremely unjust and dangerous for large segments of the population, including parents and children in the inner cities. Any steps that are taken to undo such injustice must be based on the words of the people living in those communities, both the parents and the children, because no one has a greater investment in fixing the current situation. We must work together to ensure that all children are truly safe and able to access any opportunity.

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